

Complications of the Truth

They tell me it is a fair deal. Everybody will get something. Not everything they want but enough to make all the unpleasantness go away. They tell me she will go quietly, no further word to the press, no more lawsuits if I just agree to leave. Resign my position immediately and the board and the woman and her attorney and her family will keep their mouths shut and stick to the story that the chief executive's early departure is due to personal reasons. No further comment required. No messy details either. In a way, it will be the truth too. Personally, I have been balancing on the head of a pin for far too long and it is a precarious position that no man could expect to hold forever.

"Just like that," I say from the lonely side of the conference table staring down my board of directors. None of them have the nerve to look me in the eye.

"It's ten million dollars, Bruce," the chairman says tapping his bloated finger on a sheet of paper.

"Severance?"

"If that's how you want to call it."

"After all I've done for this company," I say and someone coughs and someone else snickers even though these fools know I have put multiples of ten million in each of their pockets over the years. I pegged the needle as they say. I widened the margins, ballooned revenue, tripled the damn stock price and still it is not good enough.

"After all you've done," the chairman whispers loud enough for me to detect the sarcasm.

"It was an accident." Same way a drunk driving into a pedestrian is an accident. "I didn't do anything wrong." I did. I know it. Still, the lie comes so naturally I say it as if I'm saying good morning.

"And this way you won't have."

"What am I suppose to do? "

"Sign the resignation papers."

"After that?"

The chairman shrugs a little shrug and says the company line: "Spend time with your family."

When the chairman plucked me out of the paper company five years ago, rallied for my appointment as this company's new chief executive, we bonded over stories of wine and summers with our families. I want to tell him I always thought red wine tasted like metal, and that I will not be going on any more vacations with my family.

"What if I don't sign?"

"Are you saying you want to fight?" One of them asks as he puts his head in his hands.

"Christ." Another one spouts off.

"Think about what that will do, Bruce. The things this girl could say."

She was twenty years old, top of her class at Cornell, eager for the opportunity to shadow the chief executive of a major public corporation. She was smart I suppose but to be honest, that was not why I wanted her. It was her calves, the simply splendid ones she never covered up. She left unexpectedly mid July, or at least everyone else thought it was unexpected until she showed back up in September with a partner from Chaplin & Lodges and a complaint that stacked as high as the heels she wore. I tried to apologize to her several times. She never accepted.

“Hasn’t she already said everything?” I ask.

“Has she?”

“You sign this, Bruce and it stops.” The chairman pauses staring me straight in the eye and if I did not know better I would think he was about to shed a tear. He knew me back when, back before I got atop this sharp pin. “Think about your boys.”

Shit. He has a point. I stand up to prove to them I still have my legs but my knees shake and my thighs tingle and I feel as if I may fall to the ground. I sign the paper and leave the room for the very last time.

* * *

The call from my son’s school comes a little past noon. It is not entirely unexpected. There have been a few calls over the past months but the hesitation in the way the vice principal tells me that Jack has hurt himself again, this time on the corner of a drinking fountain, gives me hope that maybe the school finally sees what is actually happening to my son. The vice principal tells me he tried to reach my wife but there was no answer. He says it is not an emergency, just a courtesy call and he completely understands if I can not make it over given that I am a busy chief executive. Maybe word of my antics has not spread too wide. Jack is asking to go home.

“Is that what he said?” I ask. “Home?” I get a burn of quick warmth deep inside knowing my son still uses the word home.

Out in the parking lot, my car is the only one protected from the sun. Someone has keyed the driver side. I can see the long waving white line in the deep blue finish of the BMW. The damage is a shame but it makes sense. I drive onto the Parkway going north. The car rides so smooth I almost forget what I am driving away from or what I am driving towards. I cross the state line and then the Hudson at its widest point, breaking the seal on Westchester County, a place I have not been since we packed our things from the center colonial in Pleasantville and moved to be closer to the new company’s headquarters.

My wife did not want to move at first. Jack and Ryan did not care. They were too young to really feel any pain from the detachment. My wife picked out a new house three times the size of our old one. I bought her a new car and told her we could finally get that place in Sagaponack she had her eye

on. There were all sorts of things I would be able to get her once I was CEO. There would be plenty of money, not that the money mattered. It was not the cash that made me feel so good. It was not anything I could touch, none of the stuff I seem to crave so hopelessly now. NO, back then when they made me chief, the thrill that they had picked me out of everyone, that they wanted me, was enough to satisfy the these pathetic urges.

An old R.E.M song comes on the radio, one my wife loved. Maybe she still loves it. I turn my head so the passing drivers can not see me crying then the exit sign for Pleasantville comes into view up ahead, and I feel the urge to run this hundred thousand dollar automobile into an abutment. What twisted devil has the nerve to name a place Pleasantville? Oh the expectations.

I pull off the exit, and at the first stoplight, I open the glove compartment and take out the pistol and place it on the passenger seat. Do not ask me where I got it. It really does not matter. I have it and besides it should come as no surprise a man in my previous position could obtain pretty much whatever he desired. I took full advantage of the privilege and now it ends with this one last thing, its black steel on the fawn leather so different from all the other perks that satiated my appetite over the past few years. I look at the weapon while I wait for the light to go green. It does not look quite real to me more like a plaything, but it is loaded. The old house is not far, a couple rights and three lefts and watch for the pear tree. I could park in front of the barn red mailbox, turn off the ignition, pick up the pistol and get on forgetting about all of this. Sounds good thinking of it but the complications, the damn unavoidable complications. I put the pistol back in the compartment and drive through the light, back onto the parkway and to my son who needs me.

It is lovely country up here. Spring, summer, fall and winter, there is always a vista. Hills Grant Academy rests at the top of a gently rolling hill surrounded by trees that turn brilliant shades of yellow and orange in October. The school's red brick and white trim and flag pole leave no question in a parent's mind that this is the best place for their children. All of this and the annual tuition, jacked up above the cost of a year at Princeton not because the school needs the money but because the price signals a certain scarcity that appeals to our desperateness.

And so it goes at Hills Grant. A long waiting list of CEOs and doctors and Mafioso, all fighting to send their kids up the hill.

The administration is paid well. They make a point to keep the paint fresh, the lawn manicured, the classrooms smelling of chalk, and the teachers dressed in cotton. The children do not wear uniforms. They are encouraged to think freely, to think for themselves and learn through experience about right and wrong. This is nouveau chic. Traditional methods of discipline are for the feeble minded they say.

So when this kid or that kid, all brutes with thick hair and thicker arms, throw my son against

a door jamb or trip him to the floor or check him into a drinking fountain the idea goes that this kid or that kid is smart enough to know better not to do it next time. That the pain on my son's face should be enough to send some sort of message that an otherwise hard slap can not deliver more effectively. The school prides itself on this crap, and I knew it when we enrolled Jack here. They said that they would take good care of him. They would replace his milk with ice tea and have special dairy free lunches prepared just for him. They said this with a smile.

When I asked about how the other children would respond to Jack's special treatment they gave me a blank look like this was a stupid question. This is Hills Grant, they said. The children here are the offspring of intelligent, sophisticated liars and thieves. The children here know who they are. Bullying is for the lesser sorts, the insecure kids with wayward parents. This was what they told me. And I wanted to thank them for at least pretending this nonsense was the truth.

Jack is not well coordinated. This is what Mr. Vice Principal and the geriatric nurse standing behind him tell me when I arrive at the school. To keep up the charade, I ask what happened to him somewhat interested to hear the explanation the two of them give to cover up the darker side of this place.

"Accident," they say in unison. "Boy is finding his footing." They point to my son who sits around a table behind a windowed wall like he is a freak in some asylum. I watch him as he writes in his journal, holding my eyes on my boy, sighing, pissed off I have to go through this with these people again.

"You know that's not what this is," I tell Mr. Vice Principal who pulls back as if he thinks I am about to hit him in his face. "How many times?"

"Mr. Shore, he says he tripped," the nurse says to me as if she has any idea what she is talking about.

"Does he have a problem with his feet?" I ask looking at the rolls flapping under her chin, hating her, disgusted by her. She shakes her head, actually rolls her eyes up as if she thinks about what I am asking.

"Then tell me how many times a healthy boy can trip?"

"If it's not the truth then he needs to tell us the truth," Mr. Vice Principal says. "Like I said to you last time, Mr. Shore, if your son tells me then I can stop what it is you suspect is happening."

"My son's no liar." And I expect him to snap back and say: *You mean like his father?*

"Of course not, Mr. Shore." Full of sarcasm this Vice Principal is. I have never hit anyone in my life although I had plenty of cause to. I was a coward. I admit it. Still am. But now there is nothing to be afraid of. Just anger and nothing left to lose, and so I pull my arm back, tighten a fist that makes my knuckles turn the color of raw meat and then drop a limp arm right back to my side because Jack still has

everything to lose.

“He’s scared,” I say. “He’s all alone here.”

“It is best you take him and leave, Mr. Shore.” The Vice Principal says glancing down at my fist, a slight sweat breaking out on his forehead. I give him credit for standing his ground.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It catches up on you before you know it.”

He forces a smiles even though I am not sure he understands what I mean, but he thinks I am good for the tuition so he says no more.

I head for my son in the windowed room. Jack does not look up as I enter. I go to him, placing my hand on the back of his head, feeling the coarseness of his hair, thinking about when I had hair just like his.

“What are you working on?” I ask looking over his shoulder trying to read the words in his journal.

“Story,” he says without breaking his pace on the paper.

“For class?”

“No.”

I know it is not for class. A part of me wishes it were an assignment he does with a pre adolescent grudge. What every boy would complain about. Another part of me is happy it is not for class, proud that this is what my son likes to do with his time. Hell with the jocks and the pretty boys.

I pull out a seat next to him. I study his face for a while, not trying to kid myself that this is a face any different than mine and cringing at the thought of how difficult his next ten years will be. He turns his eyes toward me quick without moving his head up and then he looks back down at his paper like he has been caught. I touch his chin, trying to pull his head my way, but he resists. The black mark above his eye interrupts the pattern of acne on his forehead. It breaks my heart.

“You okay?” I do not ask what happened because it is what *my* father would have asked, and I refuse to subject my son to further brutality.

“Fine,” he says and goes back to his writing.

“You want to go home?” My voice sounds cold and to the point like I have better things to do.

“Mom was supposed to come.”

“They called me. I came.”

“I’m fine.”

He told Ashley the truth once. The third time something like this happened when he came home with a black and blue arm he broke down and told his mother it was not an accident. He did not give names, but he told her he wanted to come home. He told her not to tell me, and I love him for his ignorance alone. A child’s naivety that just because his parents do not seem to care for each other

anymore that either one of them would ever keep a secret about the child they raised together in better times.

Ashley told me to pull him out of school. We had done it twice before, and I was not going to do it anymore. It only made things worse, only isolated him more, left him feeling even more awkward, another round, always a new group to pick him apart. He could not take much more, and I told my wife he was staying at Hills Grant. We could not run from the problem is what I said. Things would change. He would grow up, put some weight on and his features would gel and it would all be fine. It really would. He would be happy one day.

“Just like you were.” This is what my wife said before telling me to go to hell and storming out of the kitchen. And maybe I told her to go to hell right back. It is all a haze now.

“Well, I’m here,” I tell Jack.

“You don’t have to be. It’s no big deal.”

I look around and make sure he sees me do it.

“Lonely room,” I say.

“So.”

“You like it that way?”

“Sometimes.”

I put my hand back on his head and tell him that if he wants to get out of this place then I will get him out of this place. He does not say he wants to go and he does not say he wants to stay so I lead him out of the building anyway. Before he gets in the car, I make sure the glove box is locked and then we drive into town to the diner he loves on Route 111. It is a place where everyone is old and bitter and dying. Not a kid or a shareholder in sight. I tell him we will get his favorite, a short stack covered in whipped cream. They serve them twenty-four hours a day there.

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The waitress at the restaurant wears a black skirt with an elastic waist that rides low exposing a tan midriff. Her pierced naval is at my eye level so I do not need to make any excuses if she catches me looking. When she asks me for a second time what I would like for lunch I turn to Jack and see he sees exactly what I am seeing. I smile and then look up at the waitress asking her name. She points to a nametag, and I conjure up a quick image of her naked. She looks relieved to finally get our orders and get the hell away from the two of us.

“She’s pretty,” I say to Jack trying to elicit a reaction.

“Guess,” he says picking at a straw. “You going to ask her on a date?”

My hand spasms and knocks over a saltshaker that takes out the ketchup bottle. A question like this deserves a quick, sharp response to put out the flames before they devour everything. Instead, I

sit here grabbing one hand with the other and worrying about how I am going to mop the sweat that has sprung like dew on my head. I start laughing because it is the only sound I can make, and I pray Jack starts laughing along with me, but why would he find any of this funny?

“She’s just a girl.” Even before I’m through saying this I see him give me that look like he knows his father is a liar. I try to correct myself. “Anyway, I don’t go on dates.” It’s not as big a lie as it sounds. “Your mother and I…”

“Yea, I know, Dad.” He snaps at me and puts a glass to his mouth to let me know that is all he is going to say on the matter. I want to argue with him and tell him he does not *know*. Sons are not supposed to know more than their fathers. That is not the way this all works. I would tell him this, but I am too scared he will keep that glass planted on his lips.

“We’re still married.” It is a harmless enough statement and the truth.

“But not really,” he says finally setting down his glass.

“No, really we are.” And it is cruel the way I say it with the aftertaste of so much false hope. “But there are complications.”

“Because you go on dates with girls.”

“I told you I don’t.” I say it like I tell my board that we are booking a dollar fifty in earnings per share next quarter even when I have no idea what we will actually report.

“You can tell me the truth.” His words are so straight, so sharp they cut right through my chest. This is where I should tell him all the things I cannot tell anyone else. He is my son, my blood, my future. If he cannot sympathize what chance do I have?

“Why don’t *you* tell me the truth?” I ask because I am not ready for this, because this is what a good chief executive does. Turns the tables. “What happened to you at school?”

“Nothing,” he says going back to his straw. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal.” He pulls back in his seat. He is smart, smarter than I ever was or will be. He knows I know. “I know it hurts.”

He touches the blackness above his eye.

“It makes you feel like shit doesn’t it?”

Jack shrugs and fidgets in the booth and I know it is not because I just swore so casually in front of him. I put my hand on top of my head and let my fingers part a section of the thin hair I use to cover an old scar.

“Come over here,” I tell him. He comes reluctantly, taking his time to slide in next to me. When I bend my head down so he can see the scar I cannot see the expression he makes, but I can imagine it. The old wound is a nasty deformity of human flesh. The damn thing still startles me whenever I stick a mirror behind my head to take a look. It is almost as if I am waiting on a miracle to

blend the scar tissue away. The doctors said it was a combination of the bacteria on the rusted nail and a mix up with the antibiotics they put me on after I left the emergency room. The wound did not heal the way it should have, and I have done everything I can over the past forty years to keep enough hair on my head to make sure no one ever gets a glance up there.

“They wanted me to cry,” I tell Jack.

He does not say anything at first. He bites his lip and squints at me.

“Who?”

“Some other boys.”

“Did you?”

“I did.”

I tell him the story no one but my dead father and a group of idiots with names like Bobby and Tommy or fill in any other all-American varsity homecoming name have heard. They were just kids at the time, a couple years older than me, but they were bigger and stronger and they had the scent of cheerleaders on their fingers and Southern Comfort on their breaths.

I do not tell Jack everything. I leave out the pissing in my pants, the vomiting and the splattering blood. What I describe is a new development of homes adjacent to my parents' backyard and how the boys grabbed me off the bus one day after school. They hauled me up to a framed unit that had its plywood roof in place. There were no workers around for some reason. That is what I remember the most about that day, this awful sense of being abandoned. They shoved my skinny neck in between the studs while one of them climbed up on top of the roof to dangle a board above my head. I was lucky, fortunate that the one on the roof was drunk or just had bad aim because if the board had hit me square on the head I probably would be dead. Instead, I caught the butt end, the end with a nail that sliced my scalp, and I watched as the snow on the ground turned red and my body shivered. The last thing I remember before passing out was my father approaching on the horizon with his shotgun in hand.

“Why did they do it?” Jack asks almost as if he is ashamed to be asking even though it is the most obvious question to ask, the most obvious and yet the hardest to answer. I can tell him it was because I was just like he is now, the easiest target, a chicken-legged stack of bones waiting for the worst to happen.

“Because they could,” I tell him instead. “They had their chance and they took it while they could and you know where they are today?”

He shakes his head, a slight look of terror on his pale face as if I am about to tell him they are in the next booth.

“They're nowhere. They're nothing.” I put my hand on his back and pull him closer to me. “Your turn will come. Everyone's eventually does.” And I kiss the top of his head as he tries to

move away. The waitress with the beautiful stomach comes and lays out our lunch.

* * *

I take Jack back to the house in Saddle Ridge after we finish eating. He gets out of the car and asks me if I am coming in, and I look down at the locked glove box and tell him I have something to do.

“I love you, Jack. Okay?”

He fakes a smile and goes into the house. I watch him walk away, open the front door and go inside. I let up on the brake just a little. Before the car rolls far I hear the sound of breaking glass and I jump out, running for the house as if every other thought in my mind has been erased.

It is nothing serious. Jack knocked a portrait off the wall in the foyer. He is kneeling down picking at the glass. I can hear him crying.

“Come on,” I say offering my hand because there is no scenario where I am going to bend down, sweep the glass, and hang back the shot of the four of us on the beach in Nassau. There is no way I am doing that. The picture might as well be of the Joneses or Smiths or some other white picket dream because it sure as hell is not our family. And I realize Jack must see the same thing I see.

“But the picture,” he says as I lead him away.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I lift him over the glass and we walk into the living room. He sits on one side of the sofa. I sit on the other. The television is turned on to some decade old sitcom. Jack does not say anything about the picture or tell me more about what happened to him at school or ask me anything more about my scar. We just sit there staring at the screen.

“How long are you going to stay?” Jack finally asks.

“As long as you want me to stay.”

“You have to go back to work,” he says.

I nod but do not tell him the details. He keeps his eyes on the screen and when Ashley shows up he knows I have lied to him because I have to go. Even if he asks me to stay, I have to leave.

My wife does not look at me. Not that I am expecting her to. She comes in and sits down next to Jack to stroke his head and I get up, turn around and walk back out over the glass that still litters the foyer floor. There is a part of me, or more like all of me, that wishes I would trip and fall on a shard, cut my leg open and have Jack and Ashley take me upstairs to tend my wound. But I am not going to trip. I am not going to any cause any more accidents. I open the front door and step out when I hear my son’s voice call from the living room.

“See you soon, Dad.”

It is enough to get me through the rest of the day. Maybe even the rest of my days.