

Trust Me

“Trust me. I’m an expert.”

The man with dead eyes relaxed in a lounge chair while Tom paced the window. Tom’s hands were clasped behind his back and he fidgeted with his fingers, interlocking them, straightening them, and making fists.

“Perhaps we should discuss the method,” the man said. He spoke in the soothing voice of a children’s TV show host and he had brown hair, neatly trimmed. He wore a plain suit and tie and he looked like anyone you’d pass in the street. Even now, Tom couldn’t have picked him out of a line-up. Tom saw him every day: pass him at the mall, at the gas station, on the street, he left no impression save his eyes. Look long enough, and they ate his face.

Tom quit pacing. He spoke from his diaphragm--what his supervisor called his big-boy voice--and addressed the man like he addressed the board. “I want it untraceable.”

The man with dead eyes made a noise. Something like a laugh, only no laugh Tom had ever heard before. “That goes without saying. I’m talking about the method. The how.”

The how. Tom interlocked his fingers behind his back again and turned to the curtain. “I want it painless.”

“Of course.”

A sailboat pattern decorated the curtain. Staring at it gave Tom a nasty feeling, like slipping on a pair of used, sweaty socks. Still, it was better than looking at the man’s eyes.

“I don’t want them to suffer,” Tom said.

“They won’t.”

“Can you make sure?”

The man took a moment to respond. It wasn’t long, but long enough for Tom to consider his actions, and the sailboats began to sink.

“My line of work requires delicacy,” the man said. “What the customer wants, I provide.”

Tom blinked, his eyes wet. The sailboats stopped sinking.

“What time?” the man said.

“I normally leave by six,” Tom said, his voice cracking. He heard his supervisor, admonishing him for addressing the board like a wuss, not a man. *Even Susan, fresh from her little social justice crusades in college, has more balls than you. She addresses the board like a man.*

Why can’t you?

Tom faced the man, meeting his eyes but not for long.

“Tuesday morning, I’ll leave early. Is six too early for you?”

“No time is too early for me.”

“Six it is then.” Pins and needles danced in Tom’s fingers. He freed his hands and laid them flat against his legs, his palms soaked in sweat. “I’ll be long gone.”

“Is it unusual for you to leave so early?”

“I haven’t done it in a long time. Why?”

“Routine helps camouflage my work,” the man said. “If they suspect something out of the ordinary, they might be on their guard.”

“Would that...” Tom swallowed. “Would that stop you in some way?”

What passed for humor filled the man’s voice. “Nothing would stop me. I will finish, one way or another.”

“Well it’s okay,” Tom said. Address the board, address the board, and he found his strength again. “They trust me.”

The man went on, not missing a beat. “What time do they get up?”

“Six-thirty.”

“Front door or back door?”

“I--” Tom almost said the fatal words. His supervisor told him two phrases were forbidden: *I’m sorry* and *I don’t know*. Never show weakness and never admit ignorance. “Front door.”

“I recommend the back.”

“Why?”

“Because,” the man said, “the back door makes things easier. I’m less likely to be spotted, and whatever story you’ll write to explain things, it will be much easier if I use the back door.”

“Back door then,” Tom said.

“Look me in the eyes.”

“It’s okay.”

The man quit relaxing. He leaned forward, cupping his chin with both hands. “It is normal to feel nervous. I prefer it, actually. The people who embrace this, they disgust me. My line of work requires delicacy from both parties, and the people who embrace it are the ones most often caught.”

“How many have been caught?” Tom asked.

“Three. All of them excited, and all of them begging to be there when I perform.”

“Were they?”

“Of course not,” the man said. “I don’t allow my customers to watch. Ask yourself, what kind of person would want to watch that? It makes me sick to my stomach.”

Tom nodded. He’d spent half a year searching for the right man for the job. As the middleman put it, Most only paint your bedroom. It takes a rare breed to paint the whole house.

A rare breed. Tom squinted. He fought it for a little while longer.

Then he looked the man in the eyes.

He looked for a long time. The man’s face decayed and so did the room and staring into those eyes Tom felt himself consumed, his delusions of addressing the board like a man. Some people would agonize over this decision, but the time for that was long gone. Staring into those eyes, Tom heard his mouth speak from somewhere far away.

“Just don’t let them suffer.”

“Trust me,” the man said. “I’m an expert.”

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The morning of, Tom woke up minutes before his alarm and shut it off before it started blaring. He took his shower in the downstairs bathroom and dressed and ate a piece of toast in the kitchen. He only made it a few bites before he dumped the toast in the trash.

He grabbed his briefcase and headed to the front door. He told himself the time to reconsider was months ago and he was doing the right thing. He didn't need anyone's approval. He had his convictions.

The footsteps pounded down the stairs and Tom looked back and saw Daniel at the foot of the stairs, his Star Wars onesie nearly too small for him.

"Good morning Daddy."

Tom couldn't move. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"You need to go back to bed."

"Where are you going?" Daniel asked.

"Work."

"What time are you coming back?"

"This afternoon."

The boy rubbed his eyes. Tom set his briefcase down and hoisted the boy by the shoulders, onto the first step.

"You need to get back to bed. Mommy's sleeping. You should be too."

"I'm not tired."

"How about you go lay down?"

"I'm not tired."

"Go to your room."

The boy rubbed his eyes again.

“Go on,” Tom said.

Tom watched him climb the stairs. When he heard a door shut, Tom grabbed his briefcase and hurried to his car.

He backed out of the driveway and idled at the first stop sign. He looked in the rearview and adjusted it until he could no longer see his house and in the rearview he passed before those eyes once more. Everything decaying and with his breath heavy, Tom looked back at the house one last time. He told himself he could trust the man, he told himself they wouldn't suffer.

After all, the man was an expert.

THE END