

As the door to the office opened, my eyes anxiously darted about the room, racing to recover the childhood memories locked within. The office remained unchanged from the last time I had entered. Mahogany bookshelves lined the walls, littered with an eccentric collection of leatherbound classics, legal treatises, and mystery novels. Any shelf space spared from the rambling library fell victim to various trinkets and knickknacks, a collection of trophies from a long and fruitful life. A photo frame uniquely forged from scrap metal, holding an outdated family portrait. A wooden gavel awarded by the local bar association for presidential service. A marble pen holder that once sat prominently on the cherry wood desk below. Like cars helplessly parked in snowfall, these trifles sat buried under a blanket of dust, awaiting a restoration to prominence that would never arrive.

A few days prior, when I first learned of my father's death, I asked to privately inspect the office. It was not that any of the fixtures were new to me, but that I had never before enjoyed such unbridled access to the room. I sat behind my father's desk, viewing the room from a foreign perspective. I shuffled through various desk accessories and examined a handwritten calendar filled with unfulfilled plans. I skimmed the bookshelves, flipping through rows of *Ellery Queen* magazines and studying the various souvenirs strewn within. Pacing the empty room, I found myself drawn to the southeast corner, which held the most intriguing keepsake in the office: a solid steel safe. The safe sat two feet tall by two feet wide, tucked tightly inside of a nook in the office wall. Its solid steel was painted black and featured rustic gold trim. Over time, large portions of the paint had chipped away, revealing a dull gray metal underneath. Across its front, large gold letters spelled a now-defunct safe company name and offered a phone number so outdated that it contained only six numbers. A combination lock sealed its contents from the

outside world. The contents of the safe were unknown to anyone but my father. No one, including myself, knew how to get inside.

Now, standing in the doorway, my eyes were drawn back to the safe in the southeast corner of the office. My interest in fixtures caused me to overlook the most significant difference in the office from the last time I had seen it: the room brimmed with visitors. It had been some time since the extended family had assembled. After all, families typically gather for holidays, weddings, and funerals, and this family had neither celebrated the holidays together nor hosted a wedding for several years. In the end, it took death to draw the family together, a biting irony that hung in the air over the various pockets of small talk. The room buzzed with family members, family friends, and an assortment of vultures poised to snatch up whatever assets fell to their grasp. My father's attorney, quite possibly the lone attendee with noble intentions, sat at the desk preparing the day's affairs. The rest of the crowd carried on in nervous chatter. It seemed that the volume of conversation showed how strong of a relationship someone held with the family. Relatives carried on conversations like lecturers faced with a disengaged audience, rambling in unrestrained prose and failing to convey a worthwhile message. Visitors and various business interests sat quietly like children on Christmas Eve, sure that a gift would arrive but knowing neither its size nor scope. I tried to shield my disdain for the wake of buzzards before me, but my face surely revealed the underlying contempt.

I remained in the entryway, neither called inside nor instructed to leave. After a few moments, the attorney noticed me in the doorway and called me to his side. As I stepped into the room, I pondered the irony of being invited to my father's desk. For years, I yearned for such an invitation. I spent hours of my childhood seated in the hallway outside this very room, basking in the aroma of cigar smoke and whiskey that seeped through the walls. My father reserved the

office for business. Fellow attorneys and politicians filed into the room like visitors to a museum exhibit, but I rarely set foot within. *This is a man's workspace*, my father said. *When you're a man, you can join me for a drink*. Yet by the time I reached twenty-one, my father and I rarely spoke. *One day you'll understand*, he said. Yet to the day he died I never understood the callous exclusion of his own child from the space he cherished most.

The attorney began distributing the estate and all of the vultures got their fill. He methodically doled out the knickknacks and trinkets to various family and friends, pausing only to explain any procedural formalities. Every now and then, my eyes shifted to the safe in the southeast corner. I often pondered what sat inside the safe and what authority the attorney had, if any, over its contents. Would the estate simply sell the safe like door prize, giving the buyer whatever sat inside? Surely not. I convinced myself that the contents of the safe belonged to the family, but I had not yet seen a locksmith or any other craftsman who could force open its door. And so I sat for most of the day with my eyes nervously locked on the southeast corner.

As the day progressed, the room slowly emptied. The buzzards abandoned the now picked clean estate. I sat patiently in the back of the room and watched the beneficiaries collect their shares. The attorney's voice became such a monotonic bore that I lost track of the estate proceedings. Strolling through an uninspired daydream, a faint voice caught my attention, and I realized that the attorney was repeatedly speaking my name. Like a churchgoer caught napping in service, I threw myself forward to greet the attorney, oblivious to the fact that my reaction gave away the very disinterest I sought to conceal. The office now lay bare. All that remained were various oddities whose owners failed to appear and the safe that had held my attention for most of the afternoon. After a few minutes of small talk, I could hold it in no longer. I bluntly asked the attorney what sat inside the safe. The attorney furrowed his brow in confusion. He

calmly informed me that the safe, and all of its contents, belonged to me. *I thought you knew*, he said. But I had no idea.

As a car salesman searches his desk for keys to a test drive, the attorney flipped through various papers in his briefcase. He withdrew a single piece of paper, stepped out from behind the desk, and walked directly to the southeast corner of the room. My mind raced through a thousand possibilities of what lay inside the safe. It could be nothing, but it could be everything. I expected the best but prepared myself for the worst. At the safe, the attorney glanced at the paper in his hand and effortlessly spun the combination lock. With each turn, a knot of anxiety rose in my throat. When he had entered the final number, the attorney grasped the handle and turned it inwards, unleashing an ominous metal click. The door swung outwards and I looked inside.

It was everything I had hoped for.