

Sins of the Father

James Farrell sat at the dinner table with his wife Marjorie, and Kenneth, the younger of their two adult sons. Sawing away at his filet with a steak knife, James glanced up from under a heavy brow at Kenneth, who was pushing peas around on his plate.

“No Garrett tonight?” James asked his wife. They were in the habit of having their elder son over for dinner on Thursday nights. The boys had not spoken or seen each other since Kenneth’s last rehab failure had caused a rift between them.

“No. He called from the office about an hour ago,” Marjorie said, casting a furtive look at Kenneth. “He said he had some abstracts to finish up and that he probably wouldn’t be able to make it.”

“Funny, I saw him at the office earlier in the day and he said he was looking forward to seeing us tonight. Did you, by any chance, mention to Garrett that Kenny was also going to be here?”

“I did, yes.”

“And was that before or after he suddenly remembered he wouldn’t be able to join us?”

“James,” she said, frowning at him.

“I’m right here, Dad,” Kenneth said, with a mixture of ennui and frustration. “Sorry if I picked a bad night.” They finished the meal with a smattering of awkward small talk. Apparently not interested in dessert, Kenneth excused himself and left his parents to the chocolate cake and coffee.

As James and Marjorie cleared the table after dessert, he realized that he wasn’t sure if Kenneth had excuse himself to leave, or if he was still in the house somewhere. James mentioned that he hadn’t heard the front door close. Marjorie said the same, so he went looking. When he heard some sounds coming from his study, he went to check, and discovered

Kenneth standing behind his desk. He leaned in from the hallway, one hand on the doorknob, the other on his hip.

“Oh, there you are, Kenny. Can I help you with anything?”

“Oh! Hey, Dad.” Kenneth walked awkwardly out from behind the desk, scratching his head. “Yeah, uh, I was just looking for that book Mom mentioned over dinner.”

“It’s not in the desk.” James brushed past him to the built-in shelves and pulled a book down. On the cover, a rising sun served as the backdrop for the title, ‘Addiction, Treatment and Recovery’. He offered the book and said, “Your mother read it and thought it might do you some good.”

James walked over to the dry bar, poured himself a short scotch and settled down with a groan at one end of the sofa. His dress shirt was a little rumpled. His sleeves were rolled up to just below the elbows, and his tie was loosened. Even at sixty-one, he maintained a rigorous work schedule at his engineering firm. He had arrived home just as Marjorie was setting the table for dinner.

“Please,” James said, gesturing to a nearby chair. “Sit. Let’s talk.”

He sipped his drink and Kenneth reluctantly slumped into the offered chair. An awkward moment passed as neither of them spoke. Kenneth flipped the book over to find a picture of the author, smiling serenely above a predictable blurb on the back cover. *‘It’s never too late to take control of your life.’* Kenneth scoffed, then glanced up over the book to see his father studying him.

“What?”

“You didn’t eat much at dinner.”

“I wasn’t hungry.”

“We paid 19.99 a pound for that filet. When did you let Mom know you’d be coming over?”

“This afternoon.”

“Huh.” James said. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

“And to what do we owe the honor of your visit this evening?”

“Why? Am I not welcome?”

“Of course you are, Kenny. This will always be your home. But we haven’t spoken in months. You don’t call us. When I call you, you never pick up or respond to voicemail. Now you show up out of nowhere?”

“I’m here because I – I missed you and I hoped you missed me too,” Kenneth said, returning to his feet. “But this is exactly why I don’t make more of an effort.” He shook his head and took a step toward the door.

“Where are you going? Come back, son. Let’s talk like two adults.”

“Seriously? Okay,” he said, dropping back into the chair. “But let’s just skip past the usual question-and-answer game. Here’s the latest – I’m using again. Still.”

He explained that he had been fired from Walmart and was living on random cash jobs and what he could borrow from friends. A month behind on his bills, he had been avoiding the landlord.

“I’ve been on a steady diet of corn flakes and ramen for the last few weeks. So there it is.” He paused and waited for a reaction, but James only sat silently looking into the slippery amber of his drink. “I’m not proud of any of this, Dad. I’m sorry I haven’t visited. Or called. But what’s the sense when all I’ve got is bad news? I just wanted to see you. Okay? At least

Mom was happy to see me.” A tense moment passed, their eyes locked in silent contempt. “Even now, I can feel you judging me.”

“No. I’m not.”

“You absolutely are. It comes off you in waves. You’re ashamed of me. You don’t really know me or even care enough to try to understand what it’s like to be someone like me. Never good enough, still living in the shadow of your big brother. Perfect Garrett - the perfect son, perfect student, perfect engineer. Good Christ, Dad. Do you have any idea how that feels?”

James only raised his eyebrows as he swallowed a large slug of scotch.

“Of course not. But you know who does know? Your brother. You should ask Uncle Mike about it sometime. If only you two were talking. Here’s the sad fact. Uncle Mike could never be you. And I will never be Garrett. Sins of the father, I guess, huh?”

James’ back stiffened. He sat up and stuck out his jaw. “I’m really sorry you see things that way, Kenny.”

“Fuck you, Dad!” He bolted to his feet, his heart pounding hard. “The only thing you’re really sorry about is that I am the way I am. Well, I’m done. I’m out. And you can keep your fucking kumbaya codependency book.” He tossed it onto the coffee table and stormed out.

James trailed him into the hallway and out toward the front door. “Kenny. Ken! Come back!” The only response he got was the front door slamming so hard the mirror in the foyer jumped on its mounting.

“What just happened?” Marjorie asked, drying a plate in the kitchen doorway.

“Oh, I caught him poking around in the study. I think he felt awkward about it, so he played the victim card and picked a fight with me. Whatever’s wrong with him is all my fault, of course. His usual self-indulgent crap.”

“I heard what he said to you about Mike there.”

“Damn kid. Thinks he’s so smart. If he’s so smart, why can’t he get his shit together?”

“Kenny *is* smart, Jim. But being smart and being good at life are two different things sometimes. He struggles.” She frowned and studied her husband for any hint of compassion or self-reflection. Nothing. “And whether you’re willing to admit it or not, you haven’t been much help to him in that department. Everyone knows he’s always taken a back seat to Garrett with you.”

“So, you’re going to jump onboard the ‘poor Kenny’ train and make me the bad guy in all this too?”

“Why must you always over-simplify things? You know what I think? I think you know you’re wrong, and you just can’t own up to it. Maybe Kenny’s right. Maybe it would do you some good to talk with Mike. Why don’t you reach out to him?”

“Leave it alone, Margie. I’ve said all along the next move is up to Mike. He needs to come to me and apologize.”

“Sometimes you really can be a hard-headed shit,” she said, shaking her head and turning back into the kitchen.

James sulked upstairs, flipped on the bedroom television and tuned in the Yankees game. He was looking at the screen, but all he could think about was what Kenneth had said about how he’d “never be Garrett”. Garrett really was an exceptional kid. Everybody loved him. Born with a naturally sunny personality four years before Ken arrived, the handsome boy had excelled at nearly everything he put his mind to. He attended and graduated top ten in his class from RPI on a full academic scholarship, and was now the vice-president and James’ presumptive successor as President of their engineering firm. “What’s not to love?” James mused to himself.

Kenneth’s life, on the other hand, had been one long struggle. A poor student, and lacking the concern or motivation to improve himself, Kenneth showed a propensity for not following the rules and making more enemies than friends. As a teenager, he and a few

acquaintances formed a garage band, which attracted and coalesced a small group of hangers-on, mostly misfits and fringe personalities like themselves. He picked up some bad habits along the way, but managed to skate through his final few school years before graduating in the bottom half of his senior class.

Unfortunately, due to James' busy schedule and aloof parenting style, Garrett consistently enjoyed the spotlight as the chosen one, and Kenneth was relegated to life in the shadows. Meanwhile, Marjorie made an effort to compensate for her husband's unequal treatment of the boys. Unfortunately, her well-intentioned but often mollycoddling approach to parenting their "baby" only served to further highlight the boy's diminished sense of himself and reinforce his place as the family's afterthought – always the "other" son.

"What the hell was I supposed to do with that?" James mumbled, as Aaron Judge crushed a hanging slider over the fence for a 12th inning walk-off home run.

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A few days later, Marjorie was up early, having coffee and working the crossword puzzle in the living room. She tried to concentrate on the puzzle, but couldn't think over all of the fuss coming from down the hall. Drawers being opened and closed, papers shuffling, and James mumbling under his breath.

"Jim?" No reply. Just more mumbling and slamming. "James?"

"Yes?" he barked from inside the study.

"I've got a nine-letter word."

"A what?" he said, appearing in the doorway, his face taut with a pained expression.

"In the crossword – I'm stuck on a nine-letter word. Starts with 'p', ends in 'ed'. The fourth letter might be 'L'. The clue is 'pinched'."

"I don't know Marge," he said dismissively. He retreated back inside the study, and the shuffling and mumbling resumed.

"Jim?" she called impatiently after a few more minutes. "Come out and have some coffee with me. What are you doing in there?"

"I'm looking for something." He appeared at the door again. "I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about how fishy Kenny was acting when I found him in here after dinner the other night. He was definitely -" In mid-sentence, an expression of recognition crossed his face and he was gone again.

"Damn it!" Another drawer slammed shut. He stomped out into the living room and slumped down in the chair next to Marjorie.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I found something missing."

"What?"

"Grandfather's retirement watch. Kenny must have taken it."

"James. You can't believe that."

"I showed it to him once. Probably a mistake. I told him it was worth a few thousand dollars. He absolutely knew it was there in the back of that drawer." He scowled and scratched his head.

"Well, I hope you're wrong."

"He'll probably sell it to finance whatever his substance of choice is these days." James stewed perplexedly while the wall clock ticked in the hallway. Marjorie shook her head and returned to scratching away on her puzzle. Suddenly James slapped his hand down on the arm of the chair, stood up, and headed toward the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m getting dressed and going over to Kenny’s place to get that watch back.” He started up, then stopped. He backed down a few steps and half-turned back toward his wife. “Purloined.”

“What?”

“Your nine-letter word. It’s ‘purloined’.”

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James parked on the street in front of Ken’s building and climbed the timeworn central staircase to Apartment #3. He tapped on the door and waited. With no reply from inside, he tapped harder and said “Kenny?” in as loud a voice as he imagined he could use without disturbing the neighbors.

He tried the knob to find it locked, and rattled it in frustration. A door immediately swung open in the downstairs hallway. A skinny older woman appeared at the base of the stairs, squinting up at him. “Is there something I can help you with?” she asked in an unhelpful tone.

“Oh, yes. Perhaps,” James said, coming down a few steps. “Ms.?”

“Simmons. I’m the super.”

“I’m James Farrell. Looking for my son Kenneth. Have you seen him today?”

“No I haven’t. He went out a couple of days ago. Haven’t seen him since. But he’s been avoiding me.” She walked toward the front door, opened it, and looked up and down the street. “He usually parks out front, but I don’t see his car.”

“Huh,” James said, coming back down the stairs. “Well, here is my card. If you see him, would you mind telling him I’m trying to reach him?”

The woman took the card and scrutinized it with a frown. She looked up at James with narrowed eyes and said, "I hate to bring up a sore subject, but your boy is back a couple of months' rent with me. Any chance you could help out with that?"

"I wish I could, Ms. Simmons. But Ken is thirty years old and responsible for his own affairs. I'm sorry."

The woman grunted, waved him off, and turned back towards her apartment.

As she was closing the door, James suddenly thought better of his answer, and spoke up. "Wait! I'll tell you what. Next time I see Ken, I'll talk to him about the back rent. Maybe I can help him out with a loan to get you current." She looked mildly appeased. "Please let me know if he shows up, will you?"

"Sure, Mr. Farrell."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

James wondered what to do next as he climbed back into his car and headed toward home. Was it was time to file a missing person report? What was it they always said on the crime shows about that – 48 hours? Or was it 72 for an adult?

As he drove, he thought about his grandfather's watch and a conversation he had with his brother Mike after their father passed away several years earlier. It was the day of the will reading at the old man's house. The attorney had done his work and left; he and Mike were in the living room sorting through what remained of the father's undesignated belongings. They chose in turns from items covering the dining table until nothing was left.

"Well, Mike. That about does it. Do you need any help getting your stuff out to the car?"

"No. I'll be fine. But can we talk about Grandpa's watch?"

"What about it?"

“Grandpa knew how much I loved that watch. When we were kids he told me that it would go to Dad, and then Dad would make sure I had it when the time came.”

“That conversation is news to me, Mike. I’m sorry, but it was named specifically in Dad’s will to go to me. As executor and eldest, I intend to hold it for safekeeping and leave it to Garrett in my will.”

“That’s a crock of shit and you know it, Jim. I told you about what Grandpa said years ago. I’m sure he told Dad that’s what he wanted!”

“Dad probably felt the watch would be safer with me. If he left it to you, he may have been concerned that you’d sell it during one of your many rough patches to pay rent or cover the cost of a used car.”

Mike flushed with anger. His right hand curled into a fist. He took a half-step toward his brother, but then gathered himself.

“Jim, you’re a miserable prick. You’ve never been a good brother to me. Listen, Dad may have had his reasons for changing Grandpa’s wishes about the watch. But, let’s cut the crap, huh? You’re just doing this out of spite because you can. It’s just a small thing to you, but it’s big to me. Now, hand it over. Grandpa said it would be mine, and I want it.”

“I’m sorry, Mike. But I’m not going to go against Dad’s final wishes.”

Mike’s face flushed an even deeper shade, and his eyes dimmed with tears of anger, or sadness, or both. His right hand clenched as he resisted the urge to punch his brother in the face. Then the fingers slowly loosened and stretched out. Fixing James with a flinty stare, he grasped his right hand with his left and massaged it.

“You’re no good, Jim,” he said, shaking his head and almost chuckling. “There’s just nothing good in you. Good-bye.” Mike stormed out. It was the last time the brothers had spoken.

As James turned down their street, the sight of a police car in their driveway immediately snapped him back to the present. He pulled in beside the cruiser, threw his car into park, and hurried inside. A uniformed officer standing in the kitchen nodded solemnly when he came in.

“What is it? What happened?” he asked. In reply the cop only gestured toward the living room, where a second officer sat on the sofa with Marjorie. Her head was down and her shoulders trembled. The cop stood up as James approached.

“I’m James Farrell. Is this about Kenneth?”

“It is, sir. I’m deeply sorry to tell you that your son was found dead this morning.”

“No!” His knees buckled and he sat down hard next to Marjorie. “Where? What happened?”

“A resident that walks their dog up near Prospect Point noticed a car parked in a corner of the overlook parking lot. It didn’t move for a couple of days, so this morning he approached the vehicle. When he saw the situation, he gave us a call.”

“How did he – how did it happen?” James asked.

“Your son had suffered no obvious injuries. A sandwich bag found on the seat next to him contained some residue that tested positive for hydrocodone. It had all the appearances of a drug overdose. I’m sorry, Mr. Farrell, but we’re treating it as a suicide. We found this on his person.”

The officer pulled a sealed envelope out of his back pocket and handed it to James. In Ken’s handwriting, it said, “I am Kenneth Farrell. Please deliver this envelope to my father, James Farrell when I’m found.” He had written the Farrell’s address along the bottom edge.

“We’ll be on our way now, sir. We’ll get you a copy of the medical examiner’s report when it’s complete. We’re very sorry for your loss.” The officer turned and walked slowly out

to the kitchen. The officers let themselves out, closing the door quietly as they did. James laid the envelope on the coffee table and turned his attention to his wife.

“Marjorie,” he said, reaching out to pull her closer.

“No!” she said, pushing him away. An angry fire sparkled in her eyes. Her jaw was set hard, her mouth in a tight line. “No, James. I can’t accept your comfort. Not right now.” She stood up and pulled her sweater close around her. “I’m sorry. I need to be alone for a while.” She stalked across the room and stepped quickly up the stairs. The slamming of their bedroom door echoed through the house. James felt a guilty sickness swell in his chest as he listened to her muffled sobs pulsing from their room.

He picked up the envelope and tore it open to find only a single small piece of paper inside. He wiped his eyes and saw that it was a receipt from a pawn shop located near Ken’s apartment. The carbon copy form was pre-printed with the name and address of the business. It was filled out with the date of the transaction, Ken’s contact information, and a description of the pawned item. “One antique Hamilton pocket watch, 18K gold, 23 jewels in hunter case. Approx value: \$4,500.00 Loan: \$500.00” It had been counter-signed by Ken and the store manager.

The days that followed were filled with all of the horribly necessary activities associated with a death in the family; identifying the body, the death certificate, funeral home arrangements, visiting hours, obituary notices, mass cards, memorial service schedule, burial details, choosing flowers, notifying relatives, making wake plans. James and Marjorie navigated all of it through a fog of grief and on the brink of exhaustion with a modicum of civil, if not heartfelt, help from Garrett. He had a hard time concealing his anger over his brother’s choice, but kept his ambivalence about the suicide to himself for Marjorie’s sake. She hadn’t completely reconciled with James yet, but they settled into a workable equilibrium and managed to help each other through it all.

Finding himself with a few unexpected free hours the day before the funeral, James decided to take Kenneth’s loan receipt over to the pawn shop. When he walked in, a bell rang

above the door announcing his entrance into a seedy, knotty pine paneled storefront. It could have been lifted directly out of an old TV cop drama. The walls were lined with the usual miscellany of musical instruments, camera equipment, sound mixing boards, microphones, drum sets, and every description of silver and gold plated utensils, tea service, serving platters, and flatware. The cash window was located at the back wall of the shop. On each side of it, glass cases displayed an array of jewelry items, each glittering piece tempting the shopper with its handwritten paper price tag tied on with white string.

When James stepped up to the counter an electronic beep sounded somewhere in the recesses of the building. A few seconds later, a moth eaten sixty-something bald guy with taped glasses and a toothpick in the corner of his mouth shuffled up behind the window. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'd like to settle this claim, please," James said, pushing the pawn ticket through a small gap at the bottom of a thick plexiglass window.

"Oh yeah," the man said, examining the ticket. "I remember this guy. Weirdest conversation I ever had with a customer." The toothpick bounced when he talked. "I would have been glad to front him five times the amount he was asking for, but he said he only needed enough money to take care of something. Wouldn't say what it was. He told me somebody'd be in soon to settle up. Who are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm James Farrell, Kenneth's father. He – well, I don't know if you heard, but he passed away a few days ago."

"Oh." The old man's face fell. He was clearly caught off guard by the news. "No. No, sir. I had not heard. But I'm awfully sorry about that."

James produced the necessary cash, and the man handed him the watch, still in its original presentation box. The storekeeper stamped his copy of the receipt "Paid in Full" and returned it. James thanked him and left the store. Back in his car, James opened the box and

pulled out the watch to look it over. As he did, a piece of paper tightly folded into a small square fell out onto the car seat. He curiously opened it and began to read.

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry things ended this way. I won't try to explain or ask you to forgive me. I know it's a cowardly thing to do. I'm just at the end of my rope. I feel hopeless and useless. Please take care of Mom. She's my biggest regret. I'm sure she'll have more trouble getting through this than anyone.

So, you've got your grandfather's watch back. I know how much it meant to you. And to Uncle Mike too. I really hope you'll mend your fences with him. He's your only brother, and life is too short for whatever trouble there is between you. Believe me, I know.

Now that I'm gone, if you think of me, please don't let it be from the last few years. Remember me from the good times. That's why I chose Prospect Point, so my final minutes could be spent looking out over Silver Lake and remembering about the only place we ever had fun together. Those were some of our best days, weren't they?

Good-bye Dad. I really do love you. Please don't hate me. Take care of Mom.

Ken

James drove directly from the pawn shop up to Prospect Point. He parked at the overlook and read Ken's letter again. Looking out over the boats and the happy vacationers on the lake, James mourned his son. And as he mourned, he remembered one perfect summer day there, kayaking side-by-side with Kenny when he was about ten. Garrett was away at scout camp, allowing them some rare one-on-one time together. He could still see Kenny smiling for the camera and holding up the glistening seventeen-inch trout he caught that day. It seemed like a million years ago. The sun was sinking low over Silver Lake when James finally picked up his cell phone, took a deep breath, and dialed Mike's number.

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