

NASHVILLE RADIO

Tom Andes

For Jon Langford

The human body only needed six hours of sleep, anyway, I told the temp, Bub, who was a Yankee—I knew from the accent—and who looked like he'd been to college. He could've been a fruit or one of those politically correct liberal assholes you saw on the news media. I adjusted my Everlast belt, picked up another flat of R. W. Knudsen organic pineapple juice in sixteen-ounce glass bottles from the forklift—each one weighed 55 pounds, but I could lift two at a time: no problem—and hauled it to the truck. I was feeling good, blood pumping in my biceps, getting warmed up. Bub struggled under just one of those flats.

To look at me, you wouldn't have thought I was inclined to philosophy, or for that matter, much of a word slinger, but my daddy sang his own country

songs, and while I might not've followed in his footsteps, I knew that magic was in me somewhere. Maybe you'd heard of my daddy, who got kicked off the Grand Ole Opry after a frolic with one of the hatcheck girls, who also happened to be a famous record producer's daughter. Back in the day, he had a couple radio hits, including the classic "Living on Back Streets, Loving on Main," but like ice cream socials, family farms, and the sacred bond of matrimony between a man and a woman, he was forgotten now.

Bub yawned while I said all that. Peter, his name was, he corrected me, like it mattered: he'd be gone tomorrow. Peter Pecker picked a pint of peppers and couldn't eat 'em, or maybe Peter the Pickle Puffer. I wanted to give him a good-natured ribbing, but he looked like he'd probably cry. An aristocrat, so what was he doing in a shipping center in Bunghole, USA—AKA Bentonville, Arkansas—working for the megacorporation folks like him hated?

"Moved here from Tulsa a few years ago, myself," I said. Time went faster when you made a little chit-chat. Besides which, I wanted to draw the guy out. I might have come off a little gruff, but I was pleasant as pie when you came right down to it—a talker, and a man of the people, like my daddy before me—and like him, I took an interest in things. More than that: even if Peter was a little different, I guess I still wanted him to like me.

When I asked where he grew up, Peter said, "All over," like it was a place. He had a nasal voice, and I imagined him standing in the manager Troy's office, same kind of stuffed shirt who'd been riding me all my life, and who threw my daddy off the Opry, despite the fact that he'd given his life to country music like God gave mankind his only begotten.

Peter stumbled with a flat of pineapple juice, and I had to help him. He needed to hurry because while he might not care, my job depended on how quickly we could empty the pallet on that forklift, and all the ones after that. But I couldn't have Peter dropping things, either.

"Like this." I showed him how to get under the flats and pick them up so he wouldn't feel it in the morning. I was doing the guy a favor, but he grunted, like he was too good to take advice from a hillbilly like me. His business if he wanted to wake up a cripple, but it was my problem if we didn't make our quota by noon.

"Any chance for a smoke, bro?" he asked. It was 9:30, and he'd been there less than an hour, hauling one flat to my four. Like he was any brother of mine.

"I've worked here eight years, buddy," I told him, which was the truth, no reason to lie about that, though I didn't mention losing my CDL or the divorce, the first wife I was still paying on, Esmæ, who worked 290 feet down the hall

in Accounts Receivable, and who would never understand about me and her kid sister, Amadine—as if Esmæ shouldn't have been flattered by the fact I'd gone with her sibling, considering the strong family resemblance between the two. What was I trying to say? That job meant something to me. Unlike Peter, I'd be there tomorrow.

Thing about my daddy, he'd never wanted kids, not with a barfly like my mom, who was a fallen Mennonite, having rebelled against her strict upbringing among the brethren in Eden, Oklahoma. Didn't want married life, and in that respect, the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. Not that I was volunteering details, but let's say yours truly, JJ McBride—short for John Junior, son of John Jacob—got around. I'd just gotten to that part of the story when Peter the Pecker Eater dropped a crate of pineapple juice. The plastic snapped, bottles rolled across the floor and shattered, yellow liquid streaming down the cement like a puddle of cloudy piss. He spread his hands, like he knew I was gonna beat his ass.

“Dude,” he said, looking around, like somebody else might have done it, and though it could have cost me my job—though I imagined Troy's disappointed face, since he'd probably have to write me up again—I'd already called bro-man a cocksucker.

Which was when he told me he was Troy's kid brother.

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Cut to a scene in which I'm sitting in Troy's office, which is air conditioned to a brisk 45, like he believes that whole global warming hoax and is trying to do his part to reverse it, and Troy's head has inflated like a big red birthday balloon and is floating off his shoulders, or at least that's how it seems to me. He's talking, but I only seem to hold onto every third word, the rest of them dribbling out of my hands like I'm trying to raise the living water to my mouth but can't drink, though I know what he's saying is important, that my life—or at least my livelihood—depends on it.

Other thing about my daddy that got him in trouble back in Music City, he was a communist, a red, which comes to mind then, too, because of Troy's face, and because his shirt is just about the same hue. Troy is the kind of guy who never made the team and spends the rest of his life trying to make up for it by bossing around the people who picked on him in high school, but Peter is a punk, by which I mean, not a kid with holes in his face working in Starbucks, but a guy who gets corn-holed in prison. He's standing next to Troy's desk and grinning like he's enjoying this, and I guess he is, since it gets him out of working half the morning.

One thing I do get from that conversation is the words *half-brother*, and from the way Troy says it, I gather he isn't too fond of Peter, either, like he wants to put a little distance between them. Then Troy gives me a piece of paper to sign, just like he's done a dozen times, a formality. Only now, instead of a written warning, I'm being told to take the rest of the week off without pay, which is a kick in the balls, it nearly being the first, and Esmee already breathing down my back about my payment on the half of the house she still owns but I live in. And before I can say anything about that, Troy hands me another piece of paper, which says my tenure at the corporation is pending the outcome of a disciplinary hearing for using hate speech.

I look up from that checked box at Troy's cleft chin, which has a dimple in it you could park a tractor in, and so help me if I don't have a tear in my eye. Seven years ago Troy transferred up from the warehouse in Sugar Land, and while I might talk him down from time to time, at bedrock we're all right. Family ties or not, what he's doing amounts to treachery, and I'm man enough to say that hurts.

But then I remember my daddy, and I buck up, just like he did when those sausage manufacturers who wanted everyone in Nashville to sound like Trisha Yearwood tanked his career, taking their petty revenge for the fact he stood

up for the workingman, and of course for that incident with the producer's daughter. If I'm going down anyway, I might as well go down swinging, like my daddy did.

When I stand up from my chair, I must do it quick, because Peter backs up in a hurry, hiding behind his half-brother, like I wouldn't roll over Troy like a dump truck if I wanted to. But if I've learned another lesson from my daddy, it's that the written word is mightier than the shotgun, or the pen slayeth the proverbial sword, so while I might enjoy watching Peter the Peckerhead piss his cargo pants, I don't do anything more threatening than point at Troy, flexing my biceps a couple times, making the veins jump, so he'll know I mean business.

"McBride," Troy says, and he explains that his half-brother has come to Arkansas from the great state of Ohio, and that Peter is taking a year off from Oberlin College to get some practical experience in the real working world, which even a dumbass like me knows means he probably got caught blowing the soccer team's equipment manager in a men's room stall—but guys like Peter always get second chances. Troy shakes his head. "I put him with you hoping you'd show him the ropes."

I take a step toward the desk, but Troy puts his hand on the phone. “You come any closer,” he says, “and I’m calling security.”

I have it in my head to say all kinds of things, about how the other half of Peter the Pecker Eater’s family must be the one with the looks and the brains, as well as the college money, if Troy thinks it’s a smart play treating me this way, but I must be overcome—to use a word my daddy often did to describe my mother, on the rare occasion she saw him—because that isn’t what comes out.

“Troy.” I lean across his desk, putting my face close to his, but he’s all talk, this man with a narrow necktie, and he still doesn’t call security. “You’re a rotten son of a bitch.” It’s all I can think to say.

He keeps his hand on the phone and doesn’t budge, not even when I slap his desk calendar, knocking over the pencils in a coffee cup that says *World’s Best (Bass-Fishing) Dad*.

“You can call in on Friday afternoon, JJ,” he says, “and I’ll tell you what time your hearing will be on Monday. This corporation takes hate speech very seriously. This is Step Five—Step Five. Step Six, and you’re out.”

He sounds like he’s reading out of an instruction manual.

Hate speech—as if what I said wasn’t perfectly natural among working-men. As if college boy is really a homo, and not just butt hurt because I called him a mean name.

I shake my finger at Troy one more time, puff up my chest, widen my shoulders, and stalk out of the room.

“That peckerwood talked my freaking ear off,” Peter says as the door slams.

I did a couple months in the Washington County lockup on account of getting busted with a roach in the ashtray of my Dodge, which is how I lost that CDL, and I’m in no hurry to repeat that. Though it takes all the self-possession I have, I manage to stop myself from going back in that room and kicking his ass so hard it wedges his ears.

When I shove the front door of the warehouse open and walk into the sun, nobody is watching, but Esmæ’s office looks onto that lot, so I can’t let on how riled up I am, not even now. I can’t give her the satisfaction. It’s only Tuesday morning, but my week is over, and I feel like I’ve lost everything.

I make it halfway to the van before I realize I’m still wearing the Everlast.

All the way home that day, I kept thinking about my daddy, and the last time I saw him alive. I thought about his funeral train, which had started in Bakersfield, California and ended up in Oaxaca, Mexico, that place my daddy had described as heaven on Earth—a giant party that lasted six days, all these people coming out of the woodwork and crawling out from under rocks, saying how they loved him and were friends of his when they'd never had two cents or the time of day for him when he was alive and struggling to find a pot to piss in. But that's the way the world treats great men: it spurns them, and it only does them the honor they deserve when they're dead.

You'd probably figure a guy like me to drive a Dodge Ram or a Ford F-150, something in the line of a pickup with those fake testicles they give bulls to preserve their self-esteem. But, in fact, I was driving my daddy's '79 Dodge A100 van, which was green, with three on the tree, meaning it had a clutch on the floor and a stick shift on the steering column, and which was the same vehicle he'd toured in during the dark days near the end of his life, when he was playing with pickup bands and couldn't trust any of the hangers on to tune his Gibson, never mind count the money at the end of the night.

I parked on the lawn of the ranch house on H Street that Esmae and I had bought when we'd moved to Bentonville from Tulsa, went inside, and cracked

a six-pack of Old Style. On top of the mortgage, I was still paying Esmæ back for her half of the house, and I was more afraid of her than I was of the Bank of Arkansas—though since I didn't want to be homeless, I still mailed the mortgage.

By the time Friday rolled around, I'd gone half out of my mind, and I'd heard twice from Esmæ, once to tell me she was hoping I'd make my payment on time, and again to tell me she was still expecting the same. By that morning—which also happened to be the first—I hadn't sent the check, and I hadn't told her what happened with Troy and his pencil-neck half-brother, either, though she must've known, considering how news traveled around our workplace, which was a regular nest of gossiping pit vipers, worse than an episode of *The Kardashians*.

She called at lunchtime: two Underwood deviled ham sandwiches with stone ground mustard and a half-gallon carton of two percent from Marvin's IGA. She was on her break.

"I looked in the mail this morning, JJ," she said, turning the screws right away, "but I didn't find an envelope from you." She *tsk, tsk, tsk*-ed me, staring at the glare on Montel Williams' bald head on the television, same way I might do if she was in the room—*shutting down*, she used to call it, which was a

funny way of saying waiting out the storm. “You always were stubborn, and you’ve never been able to control that temper, have you?”

The fact her sister was named for a French dish that involved green beans might have given you the impression Esmæ’s family wasn’t the classiest bunch, and you might not have been wrong about that, though Esmæ had always wanted better for herself than her seven brothers and sisters, which was where we’d connected: we’d had dreams. Once upon a time, we’d planned on opening a coffee shop and antique store in Rogers, hoping to get in on the ground floor before that whole Starbucks craze hit Northwest Arkansas, but like so many plans, that had turned to dust in our hands. Some men were made for rambling, and even if I hadn’t gone far geographically in my life, I was one of them, just like my daddy. But more than that, hard as we worked, Esmæ and I just couldn’t get ahead, and eventually that had ruined our marriage, driving me to do what I’d done with Amadine.

“I’m gonna need a little extra time this month,” I said.

“Are we not going to talk about this?” she asked.

I reached into my mouth and removed gummy day-old sourdough and deviled ham from my palate with my thumb. It was a quarter of twelve, but I was still in my skivvies and an undershirt, and I hadn’t shaved since Tuesday

morning. Ordinarily, I got up at six, but I'd slept till ten that day, like without that job, as trivial as it might have been to people, my whole life was a house of cards that just folded up with nothing to support it.

"We don't need to live in the past," I said, meaning Tuesday, but meaning all of it, too. Though I didn't see what business it was of hers what had transpired between Troy and me down at our end of the facility. She gave an unpleasant little snort, like she knew something I didn't.

"You're turning into a no-account yahoo," she said, "and you're gonna shoot yourself in the foot and ruin everything good in your life, just like your dumbass daddy did."

Now, first of all, where I come from, talking like that about a man's daddy is like purchasing a non-transferrable one-way ticket to Ass-Kicking City, tantamount to insulting a man's entire family line. But another fundamental dictate holds that a man should never hit a woman. My ex-wife was therefore exploiting a loophole in the code I lived by, which allowed a woman to say and do things that would have earned a man a quick trip to the ER, and it wasn't the first time she'd done that, either, having burned (for instance) my favorite rhinestone suit, which my daddy had left me, on the lawn of that same

house where I was now living, the night she caught me and Amadine on the couch.

“Let’s not start talking like that,” I said, trying not to let her provoke me because I also knew that underneath those words were deep wellsprings of hurt. She’d never been able to forgive me for what I’d done with Amadine, never been able to understand how in a weak moment, a man can say and do things that don’t express his deepest self. Never been able to understand about my daddy, either—that it wasn’t him that shot himself in the foot, but rather that he’d been too good for the world, a prince among men, too full of fire and life, and so the world, or at least the country music establishment, had tried to snuff him out.

“Talking like what?” she said. “The truth? Just because you don’t want to look at something doesn’t mean it don’t exist. I’m talking about the elephant in the room—the one with its foot on your head.”

I told her she watched too many talk shows, which are always trying to get people to yap about their feelings, as though there were something noble about spending half your life sitting on a couch and crying—wallowing, my daddy called that, least when my mama did it. Though underneath that, I’ll admit I felt the sting of truth, like there was something I hadn’t quite wanted

to look at, like a shadow or a speck of dust at the edge of my vision, dogging me all my life. After all, I was the one sitting on a couch—same one Esmae and I had bought for \$145 at the flea market in Fayetteville, and on which she'd eventually caught me and Amadine—and while I wasn't crying, I was feeling pretty bad for myself, so even that sandwich didn't taste good anymore.

"Be that as it may," Esmae said, an expression she threw around when she was trying to sound smart, "you might be having some time to catch up on your daytime TV pretty soon. Word around the office is Troy's going to ride you out on a rail over this. His brother is very sensitive."

I laughed. She'd never understood about men—not about me and my daddy, and not about me and Troy, either. I wasn't sure Peter the Pickle Puffer qualified.

"Troy's a good old boy," I said.

"I heard you tried to come at him across his desk."

Was that what they were saying around the water cooler, I asked her? Old Hothead McBride—good for a few yuks while those ladies in Payroll gobbled down their Chick-fil-A. I should've charged admission.

"That's what I heard." Gloating over the phone, and that was too much for me. She'd always known when to twist the knife. Sometimes I missed it.

“Now that’s a goddamn lie,” I said.

“Temper, temper.” I could hear the little thrill in her voice, same as always, like she was happy she’d zinged me, like a matador flashing the red inside his cape in front of a bull. I wiped my face with my hand, took another glug of milk. The carton was empty.

“You’ll get your check,” I said, hoping to put an end to the conversation before it went any further south, before I said or did something really stupid.

“Amadine says hi.” Esmae’s voice changed when she said that, same way it had earlier, like she knew something I didn’t, and prickles went all up and down my back, a little bit of sweat beading in the hair under my arms. The two of them still lived together, if you could believe that, in half of a duplex I guessed I was helping them pay for in a subdivision in Springdale, a household I imagined being like a den of witches, with frogs boiling in pots, probably with locks of my hair and pins sticking out of voodoo dolls in my shape, to boot. “And if you thought you were going to drive a wedge between us,” she said, “You’ve got another thing coming.”

“My daddy was a hero to the workingman,” I said because there wasn’t much else I could say. As I’d told Esmae a thousand times, I’d been wrong, and I was man enough to admit it—so if she wanted to steamroll me by throwing

her sister in my face, wasn't anything I could do except sit and take it. I'd messed up, plain and simple: broke, and still blaming myself for the fact we'd gone upside down on that commercial property in Rogers, and there was Amandine, living with us after she'd moved, so she could get away from bad influences in Tulsa, all fresh-faced and 22, with that baby powder smell, like a younger version of my wife. One I hadn't disappointed yet, and one that didn't expect more of me than a roll in the hay. I'd only done what came natural, like my daddy had with that hatchback girl, the producer's daughter, God help me.

"You know," Esmae said, "my sister always said you were a tiger in the sack, and I guess we were agreed about that—you do come on like a freight train, JJ—but she never could understand why I'd married you, on account of you being so pigheaded. You should hear yourself, still ranting about your daddy."

"You don't understand," I told her. But I might as well have let her subject me to more abuse because the damage was done. I felt like a badger cowering in a hole, like my head might explode, my brains popping out my ears, like in a cartoon. The words were coming, but they came faster than I could spit them out.

“If your daddy was such a hero,” Esmæ said, a wasp zeroing in for the kill, “why’d he leave your mama knocked up and living in a trailer while he drove around the country, playing his stupid songs and trying to stick it in every piece of chicken he come across? Your mama worked every day of her life in that goddamn laundromat, so why isn’t she a workingman, too?”

I started to tell her it wasn’t the way she was painting it, that my daddy had been a man of the road, born to ramble, a natural man who ate when he was hungry and drank when he was dry and took his loving on the run. My mama had ended up third shift manager at the Mickey D’s on Interstate 44, the famous one on the Will Rogers Turnpike in Vinita that spans all four lanes of the highway, which wasn’t bad for a woman who’d come from a bunch of Mennonites living in wagons, people who didn’t believe in running water, and she was doing fine, if I did have to help her from time to time, probably watching her soaps while she ironed her uniform right now. But Esmæ didn’t want to hear it, and anyway, now that she’d got her licks in, conveniently enough, she said she had to go because her lunch break was over.

“You can’t keep running from the truth forever,” she said, like she had a direct line to the capital-T Truth, the Batphone to God, and I kept hearing those words the rest of the day after I hung up, while I sat home and licked

my wounds, so that by the time I called in to find out from Troy what time my disciplinary hearing was going to be on Monday, I felt really terrified, like I'd already lost everything and was now about to lose just a little bit more.

“Three o'clock,” Troy said, and I waited for him to say something else, a little word of encouragement, to let me know he had my back on this, like old times. But there was only dead air, a photocopier or a fax machine running in the background, and I could have sworn I heard Peter's nasal voice, and then a click, and silence on the line.

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I was twelve years old when my daddy died, his poor old ticker finally giving out in his room at the Motel 6 on Highway 99 in Bakersfield, California, with his 1965 Gibson ES-120T with the sunburst finish, a bottle of prescription Vicodin, and a glass of Maker's Mark by his head. A hero's death, though the last time I saw him, a few months before that, he'd stopped by my mama's trailer in Miami, Oklahoma, on his way to a gig in Liberty, Kansas, and that was the man I remembered: silver-haired, in dungarees, with a powder blue shirt, smelling of the musty inside of that van, of Halls cough drops and Old Gold cigarettes—a memory I kept playing over to myself that weekend while I sat on the couch, pounded Old Style, and waited for my hearing. That guitar

was still hanging on my back bedroom wall, though I couldn't play a lick, and if things got bad enough, I might've pawned it, but I couldn't do that to my daddy's memory. He'd given it his all every night, putting on a show for the hard working people who'd scrounged together the cover charge to come see him, shaking his hips so he'd destroyed his joints, and when he wasn't onstage, he walked with a cane.

Come Monday morning, I'd made up my mind about a few things, not least of which was that I needed that job, so I put on the white suit embroidered with red roses my daddy had left me, which was the only suit I owned, and I prepared to humble myself because I knew that was what they wanted from me. But as I drove up the 540 to the shipping facility, the billboards with their easy slogans seemed to taunt me: *Save Money. Live Better.* As if it were just that simple. And I wondered what my daddy the pinko would have thought of the fact I worked at a place where they'd installed cameras in the break rooms to keep us from getting along too well, and where half the stuff we sold was made by Malaysian kids who worked for three cents a day—kids I'd always thought were lucky to get those three cents, and maybe they were, but I knew there was another side to it. The cloud hovering over me was so

thick and black that I didn't even get a thrill from the billboards that pissed off those libtards in Fayetteville: *Abortion stops a beating heart*.

To his credit, Troy had a hangdog look when I came into his office, like he at least had the decency to feel bad about laying me off for a week. College boy took one gander at my suit and snorted, and I swore I heard him make a crack about the Opry out of the corner of his mouth—like he was one to talk. He had on that pink striped shirt they made the Manager Trainees wear, like a giant candy cane, and sure enough, according to the badge on his chest, in the six days since I'd been driven from that room like a whipped cur, he'd been promoted.

"JJ," Troy said, like we were still friends. I pulled out the chair across from his desk and sat, just as I had last Tuesday, only difference being that this time, Peter was on the same side of the desk I was, like we were in couples counseling, and if he'd leaned over and put his hand on my knee, well, I might've broken my vow to myself not to stomp him into next Sunday.

"Let's get this over with," I said. I had that Everlast in the van. Figured if I made nice like they wanted, I could still clock in and work the last 90 minutes of the day.

“You don’t need to be like that.” Troy had a sour look on his face, like he’d bitten into a bad Filet-o-Fish. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was then I noticed the digital recorder on his desk, and I felt a little flutter of fear, like my lunch might come back up, that same stone ground mustard, sourdough, Underwood deviled ham, two percent and all. “We’re trying to be your friends here,” Troy said.

“Friends,” I said, and I thought of my daddy and how one by one, after that incident with the producer’s daughter, all the majors had snubbed him—Arista, Sire, Warner Brothers, and the rest—until he’d ended up on Bloodshot, a small label out of Chicago that could barely afford to float him the money to put gas in the van and keep his suits pressed. I thought about that funeral train, and how he’d looked lying in that coffin in Oaxaca before they burned him, wearing one of his same white suits, with his face made up, and all those traitorous bastards who’d been sponging off him all his life having a last go-round at his expense, taking their photos with his embalmed corpse, sticking cigarettes between his lips and pouring Quaaludes on his pillow, while I, his only begotten, sat with my mother, all but ignored by his so-called friends. And I wondered what kind of “disciplinary hearing” this was going to be, with only

the three of us in the room. “Is that why you’re recording this?” I asked. “Because we’re friends?”

“This is for your protection, too,” Troy said, and he pressed a button on the machine and read the date into the recorder.

“We go back a time,” I asked, “don’t we, Troy?”

He sat up straighter behind that desk, shuffling papers in front of him, like maybe he didn’t want to acknowledge that fact, or was even ashamed of it. “Yeah,” he said, “we do, which is the only reason I didn’t fire you after what you said to my half-brother—to Peter—the other day. It’s 2017. You can’t get away with saying certain things in the workplace.”

By certain things, I knew he meant the word *cocksucker*, which seemed natural enough to throw at a guy who’d shown up late, done a half-assed job, and destroyed 50 bucks worth of inventory in less than an hour, but it wasn’t going to get me anywhere to say so. I knew what they wanted from me, which was that I should tell Peter the Pissant I was sorry, and even though it ripped apart every fiber of my soul, well, between Esmae and the Bank of Arkansas and everything else, I guessed I needed those twelve bucks and 75 cents an hour, because over the weekend, while I was wrestling with all my demons, I’d decided I was going to do just that.

“I know what year it is,” I told Troy, in case he really did think I was that stupid, and because I couldn’t swallow all my pride, not at once, not without a piece of it coming back up.

“Didn’t say you didn’t,” he said, but if you check the transcript, he’d implied exactly that.

Peter had this funny expression, like he half-expected me to leap out of that chair and blast him in the face. But underneath that, I saw another look, one that made what I was about to do hurt all the more: snooty, like he’d gone his whole life knowing all it took was a little paperwork to put guys like me in our place, like he had nothing to fear from an animal like JJ McBride, not as long as I was on a leash chained to a post in the yard where I belonged.

The son of a bitch—I hated him right then.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I felt a bit of myself wither up and die, thinking of my daddy and those record executives, and however bad things had got, he’d never stooped to lick their boots. Esmae always said I was the one who sowed the seeds of my own demise, and even though I knew better, I told myself she’d be proud of me for doing this, despite the fact that my so-called pigheadedness was part of the reason she loved me, even if she couldn’t admit that to herself, and her sister couldn’t, either. I reached out and chucked Peter on the

shoulder—he flinched, of course, and looked at his arm like I might’ve given him a social disease, and Troy’s hand jumped for the phone, like he was about to make good on his threat from last week and call security—but I’d just done it for comradely effect. “Didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, buddy.”

There, I’d lowered myself, crawling across the floor on my belly like a worm, just like they wanted, and I swear, I was up out of my seat and halfway to the door, like maybe I could go back on the floor and get to work, in my embroidered suit and Tony Lama boots and all, when Troy’s chair scraped across the cement.

“Hold it a minute,” he said. He sat back behind his desk with his arms folded across his chest, in one of those same red shirts he wore every day, with that thin black tie, the overhead fluorescents glinting on his glasses. “I’m afraid this is a little bit more serious than that.”

“You’re not gonna let him get away with this,” Peter asked Troy, and I could have choked Peter, “are you? I didn’t even want this stupid job, and now I have to be insulted?”

Troy shushed his half-brother. Fuel to the fire, the fact he didn’t want his job, and he was going to make me beg for mine.

I stood there with my hand on the office door, and that was when I started to see how it was going to be, that it wasn't enough to make me apologize and grovel in front of a dipshit like Peter, but they had to change the way I walked and talked and thought, too, like a bull that's had its nuts cut off, and not even the decency of a pair of neuticles to replace them.

My hands were shaking. But I needed that goddamn job, and not just because of my mama and my mortgage, but because it told me everything I knew about who I was and where I belonged in the world, and at the end of the day, I didn't really have much of anything else going for me. Esmae hated my guts, and what could I say about my family, except that maybe I hadn't inherited my daddy's gift with words, not if I was working here. I sat down again.

"This isn't the first time we've had this kind of problem, is it?" Troy asked me, sliding the recorder between us, the better for me to talk into it, and I conceded that no, it wasn't. Not the first time we'd had a difficulty with me using strong or even objectionable language in the workplace, and not the first time I'd managed to make one of the temps or even one of the Manager Trainees feel harassed or drive the poor slobs right out the warehouse door, because they couldn't or wouldn't work like real men or women, either, no sirree, Bob.

Troy nodded.

“I’ve given this a lot of consideration,” he said, and I had no reason not to believe that, like maybe it really did put him in a pickle, having this hotheaded guy like myself who’d been working there for eight years on the one hand, and this spoiled rotten college brat who wanted everything in the world to go his way on the other, both of us what my mama used to call intractable, which was a word she often used to describe my daddy, after one of his late night calls from phone booths across the Midwest—collect, of course.

“I can take this upstairs,” Peter told Troy. “You know Dad plays golf with the regional GM. I can’t work here if people don’t have any respect for management.” Like writing a guy up for using a word was any way to earn respect—but I guessed they hadn’t covered that in college.

“Now cut it out,” Troy said, and he must have been fed up because he didn’t even bother to stop that device from recording, despite the fact it was getting personal between him and his half-brother. “I said I’d discipline him,” Troy said. “I never said nothing about taking it further.”

Discipline me—like I was a dog that had crapped on the carpet and not a flesh and blood man sitting right across the desk, a guy he’d once called friend. As if sucking it up and saying sorry to Peter the Pansy wasn’t punishment enough.

“You don’t know how it feels, man,” Peter said to me. He turned in his chair, like he wanted to face me but didn’t have the guts, or he was too squeamish to talk to me and was anticipating me socking him in the mouth. “Guys like you,” he said, and he waved, like he was fanning away a bad smell. “You never have any idea what it’s like to be picked on because it’s always been easy for you, and you’ve been handed everything all your lives.”

I burst out laughing, fit to split the seams of that suit, which had grown a mite tight over the years, I’ll confess, my nutrition being somewhat better than my daddy’s, which had consisted of a predominately liquid diet, and bourbon, at that. The idea that John Junior McBride, the errant son of a n’er-do-well country singer and a fallen Mennonite, a workingman who had married a woman come from a long line of hardscrabble moonshiners, bootleggers, whores, and dirt farmers, and who had then lost her, had been handed anything in his life—well, that just about killed me, and I told him so, watching his face blur through my tears of laughter as it squeezed up into a prissy expression, like I’d dribbled on the toilet seat, and he had to wipe it up, since he probably sat when he had to take a leak. Maybe he wanted to see the foreclosure notice on that commercial property in Rogers, the letter from the Bank of

Arkansas that had squelched my ex-wife's dreams and tanked our marriage, if he thought I'd had it so goddamn easy, I told him.

"See what I'm saying?" Peter asked Troy. "Says he's sorry. But he doesn't even know he's wrong."

"Goddamnit, JJ," Troy said. "I'm trying to help you."

"It's just a word," I said, and I started the tirade that could ruin everything, but at the same time, by standing up for myself and destroying what I'd spent eight years building, I felt I was striking a blow at the managers in their stuffed shirts and their neckties, that I was finally worthy of my daddy's legacy. Hadn't Peter ever heard that expression, "sticks and stones may break my bones?" What about what my mama used to tell me, that when somebody teased you, it was only because that person liked you? Hell, I'd only wanted him to like me, or maybe show a little respect, since I did know more about that job than he did, even if I'd bounced out of Northwest Arkansas Community after two semesters and been a dumbass reprobate all my life.

"Long and short of it, JJ," Troy said, interrupting me, and pointing at me while he propped himself up with a forearm on his desk calendar, "you want to keep working here, you need to go to counseling for anger management, and you need to enroll in a sensitivity training."

I just about hit the roof, though I might've considered it, even if I couldn't believe Troy had the gall to suggest it. But by that point, I was like a train pulling out of the station and gathering momentum, and I knew that like my daddy, I was standing up for something bigger than myself, like a rock of meaning in a world gone wrong, a lone hero fighting all the things that were destroying his way of life. I couldn't let it go, not when it was a matter of principle, so I told him again it was a harmless word.

"He probably hates the Mexicans who work here, too," Peter said, triumphant. As if I'd ever said anything about the goddamn Mexicans. And then he delivered what I guessed he thought was going to be the killing blow, the mean thing he'd been saving himself up to say all that time, maybe since I'd told him half my life story when I was trying to bond with him in the warehouse last Tuesday morning, me thinking he might be regular folks, the kind of guy you could have a beer with at a barbecue: "You're just an ignorant, white trash piece of shit," he said, "and you'll never amount to anything more than that—you and your stupid redneck, country singing daddy. Jesus, if he was so great, why'd he abandon you, anyway?"

Given all I've said about words and how they shouldn't have the power to hurt, I'm probably going to sound like a hypocrite because I'm here to tell you

that stung. Hit me where it counted. And I've already told you about that code I lived by, according to which Peter the Pecker Sniffer had just purchased a one-way ticket to an ass kicking, with an ambulance ride to Northwest Medical Center thrown in. But I also knew that if I socked him in the face like he deserved, that would make every bad thing he'd said about me true, and I sat with that, boiling with rage, trapped between my higher and my lower selves and not able to do much with either of them, until I decided on the thing that would have made my daddy proud: words.

"Cocksucker," I said, and I knew that by a certain way of looking at things I'd lost, like when Esmae pushed my buttons, and I yelled at her on the phone. But in a weird way, I felt like I'd won, too. Like when you had nothing more to lose, you had everything, and you were free.

"Cocksucker," I said. "Cocksucker. Cocksucker."

Look, I told them: I said something mean, and nobody died.

"You're done here, JJ." Troy stood. "Get out of my office."

Peter was halfway out of his chair, but he wasn't shouting at me. He was yelling at his half-brother. "I can't believe I let you and Dad talk me into coming here and working for this company for my year off," he said. "I should've stayed in Columbus and kept working for that startup, like I planned."

When I stood up, I did it fast, like I'd done the other day, and I only realized too late that it must have looked like I was going to come at Peter. And when he popped me on the nose, I was so shocked it took me a minute to realize what had happened—and hell, I was almost impressed he'd actually had the nuts to do it. My eyes filled with tears, and blood dribbled down the front of my daddy's suit, right onto one of the red roses on the white lapel, which was now besmirched by my own bodily fluid. That suit was an heirloom, and apart from that van and the Gibson guitar on my bedroom wall, it was the last physical connection I had to my daddy, the greatest man I knew.

I didn't even ball my fist, just smacked Peter across the face with the back of my hand, so he went over that chair and hit his head on the corner of Troy's desk with a *thunk* you can hear on the recording.

"Out." Troy came around the desk. He had the phone in one hand, calling for security, while he held the other up like a traffic cop, standing between me and his half-brother. Troy had no loyalty to me, and not to his own class or kind, or to the proletariat, either. He was what my daddy would have called a scab, too sorry to shit between his shoes, and I couldn't believe I'd ever called him my friend. Behind him, Peter crawled across the floor, holding his temple, but thank God, there wasn't any blood.

“That’s assault,” Peter said, stumbling to his feet like one leg was shorter than the other and then kneeling again. He managed to stand, holding that chair between us like a lion tamer, and it was funny, but it was like I’d never actually seen him before, not until I’d hit him. He was 21, maybe 22, which wasn’t much more than half my age, hardly old enough to drive across the county line to buy liquor, and still with baby fat in his cheeks—a kid. I thought about that word I’d said to him, and I wondered what it meant to him, whether he’d been called that at other times in his life, whether he’d done it, even—not that I’d have cared if he had. If he made good on that threat to press charges, with my record, I was probably going back to jail.

He looked scared, so I guessed I’d made my point. His nose was bleeding, like mine was.

“They’re coming for you,” Troy said, “son.”

Ordinarily, that *son* might have earned him the same treatment I’d just given his half-brother. But I told him I planned on walking out of that office on my own two feet, and I did just that. I turned toward that door and walked, Troy shouting about Step Six behind me.

Funny what you think at times like that because when I walk into the hall, what hits me full force is the fact Esmæ was right: my daddy cared more about a make-believe idea of the workingman than he did about me, his own flesh and blood, or about the woman whose loins he got me upon, and I've been trying to live up to that example, to something that don't even exist, all my life. And then the tears in my eyes aren't because Peter popped me in the nose, but because that thing that's been floating at the edge of my vision has finally come around to stare me in the face, and even though it's small like a hornet, it's the meanest thing I've ever seen, which was maybe what Esmæ meant when she was talking about the truth. I've never realized how lonely freedom is.

She's waiting in the hall, sitting on one of the bucket seats outside Troy's office, and when she sees the blood on my suit, she gasps. And of all things, I recall the story my daddy told me the last time I saw him, about a skinny-assed belt-and-suspenders Alabama cop who'd busted him for contraband in Huntsville and given him a guitar, so he could play in his cell, which my daddy said was his proudest moment. "They play your songs on the Nashville radio," he told me, "and your life will never be the same." And though no one will ever

remember my name, though I'll be forgotten just like my daddy, I know I'm just like him, a McBride to the end.

Esmæ's voice brings me back to the present, but she's frowning and shaking her head, and while I might want to take comfort in her arms, there's no peace for me there. "You always did listen with your mouth," she says, as rough hands take me by the biceps, those security guards tugging on the arms of my daddy's suit and dragging me down that long corridor past the faces of my former coworkers and into the sunlight, where I don't even know who I am.

Tom Andes was born in New Hampshire and has lived in the middle of the country and on three coasts. His writing has appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories 2012*, *Witness*, *Great Jones Street*, *Atticus Review*, *TOUGH: Crime Stories*, and many other publications. He won the 2019 Gold Medal for Best Novel-in-Progress from the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and was also short-listed in the short-story category. He lives in New Orleans, where he works as a freelance editor; teaches for the New Orleans Writers Workshop, which he cofounded; and moonlights as a country singer. His sporadically updated website is tomandes.com.