

## A FAIR EXPLANATION

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It occurred to me—after a minute of mashing “control-F” to find my name, not seeing it, and feeling an orgasmic sense of relief—that this was a scanned document and thus not searchable by text, which recharged my fear and sent me back to the top of the document to read through it manually.

There was nothing else to do. My office, expansive but a couple doors removed from the coveted corner, reflected the funereal quiet that had fallen over our floor, one of the several we leased in this nondescript semi-urban block. Despite the fact that it was only two months before the peak of tax season, few clients called the offices of Peters & Mapplethorpe, CPAs, and those who did only wanted to complain: about being roped into news stories that they had no business being in, about the long and complicated letters from our attorneys and being summoned for depositions that would last hours.

There was a cardboard scent to the bankers' boxes that I will never forget, though none of the dread omens had visited my office yet. They were scattered throughout the cubicles in the center of the floor, and the ones that were not folded into shape and filled with files, plastic organizers, photos of loved ones, and staplers, lay on the floor in flat shrink-wrapped piles waiting their turn. Most of the people leaving so far were doing so voluntarily.

My eyes gravitated to passages of the document that I was sure were meant to catch them:

*Certain principals of The Firm did knowingly create and perpetuate a culture which actively encouraged the harassment and victimization of junior employees. It was considered a rite of passage at The Firm for senior employees to claim a junior employee as their own and subject them to a hazing ritual which in extreme cases included instances of inappropriate relationships, assault, and emotional manipulation.*

I told myself I had never done anything like this. I barely knew who the junior employees were—barely saw them, in fact. I stayed in my office all day. I took phone calls, attended meetings, visited clients when they requested me. My job was pleasantly boring.

I continued to scroll and did not see the two words I feared most: Roger Lewis. Those two words, my own name, inscribed on a brass nameplate on my desk and a matching sign outside my door, as if I might forget them. My eyes grew used to the letterhead of the New York law firm our board had hired to conduct the investigation. Their name, in solemn capital letters, was printed atop every one of the 64 pages of the report. The only other name I saw more frequently was his.

*With the knowledge of members of the Board of Directors, PETERS encouraged senior staff at The Firm to subject junior employees to these elaborate rituals. PETERS, having been made aware of violations of The Firm's policies by his Chief Human Resources Officer GOMEZ, responded curtly in an email that he was "happy to let the jr ppl know who they are working for."*

*This investigation uncovered multiple instances of PETERS, in private with junior and senior female colleagues, allegedly exposing himself and in the words of one complainant, "daring them to call HR or whatever."*

First and foremost, George Peters was a drunk. His office stank of gin and olive brine, which he frequently dribbled on the carpet, and it was common knowledge among those of us immediately below him not to allow clients to enter his office without at least an hour to clean up and freshen the air. He had

long since given up cigars, which was a pity because they would at least have masked the more incriminating odors.

Twenty-five years ago, George had hired me when his firm was the two of us plus seven other partners. Only Norman Mapplethorpe, who had been two decades our senior, had departed of that first group of us, and it was only because he had died. He'd been found in his office, slumped in his desk chair, his coffee spilt over neatly arranged stacks of tax forms, his suit freshly pressed. A heart attack, the coroner found. I envied his quick and easy exit, the kind words from colleagues and clients and family, the fact that he would never know how many times his name appeared in this report, implicated in the deeds of his business partner.

George gave the eulogy at Norman's funeral. It was the last time I remember seeing him completely sober, and the last time I felt like I knew him.

### §

I still have a copy of the report. Several copies, in fact, but the authoritative one with my frantic annotations is now wrinkled. There are a few purplish smears from blueberry muffins, a coffee stain or two. Deep creases in the pages I have read over and over again. I could pick out its exact place in one of the seven boxes of files I have carried from the car and into my small hotel room.

Five years ago, George Peters went to jail, and his company fell apart. I have all the clippings from the *Albany Times Union* from when he was arrested. Box 2. A few of the local reporters and even some national journalists called me, but I had assured them—strictly off the record—that I had no knowledge of the terrible things he had done. I even hired my own lawyer, anticipating that I might be called to testify. But George had entered an early plea bargain. Somehow, he only went away for three years, later shortened to two plus probation.

Now, I have found him. I have traced him here, to a small Pennsylvania town a half hour north of Scranton.

My search took me clear across the Southern Tier of New York, through Binghamton and Corning and Elmira, chasing dead-end newspaper articles and bad leads. Three former colleagues refused to give me an address. Even in forced retirement, I discovered that I was not among his true loyalists, his most devoted foot soldiers in the monstrous acts he had perpetuated.

Once I discovered he was in the state, I tried all the usual methods. The northern Pennsylvania Yellow Pages had shown no sign of him. Nor had calls into at least two dozen Departments of Elections and Boards of Canvassers in counties selected at random, to search the voter rolls. There were no LLCs

registered under his name. He could have been anywhere between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Finding him required going beyond public records.

Though I spent my living counting figures, somehow I cannot bear the sight of my own bank statements. The shabby chain hotel I am staying in this week, hours from home, is a testament to my impending poverty. When Peters & Mapplethorpe collapsed shortly after the report came out, it was liquidated by some faceless judge, and my partner equity became worthless. I tried for several months to regain employment, but my status within the defunct firm meant I was toxic. My expansive country house ten miles out of Albany—an early retirement gift to myself—lost nearly a third of its value after the recession. In one of my only accurate forecasts, I determined it would be impossible for me to pay off the mortgage, so I sold it at a loss, cashing out my retirement to erase the debts. My one-bedroom apartment closer to the city had shuddering pipes in the winter that frequently wept with leaks. The landlord was ruthless with rent increases, canceling out the benefit I had calculated from my tax losses. I would be doomed within five years, possibly less.

My phone vibrates. *Dad I know where you are and what you're doing.*

I pick it up. My adult daughter, who lives in New York City with her boyfriend, has no money to spare. I have not asked her for any, nor would she oblige me if I did. Perhaps before, but certainly not now.

*What do u want*, I text back.

I organize the seven boxes in an orderly row, along the wall below the window. I prop my suit carrier on the foldout luggage rack and hang my shirts, jackets and pants in the closet. The fresher items I hang near the door; the shabbier shirts with yellowed collars, the blazers with frayed cuffs and dangling buttons, the slacks with worn-out pocket seams, I push to the back where I can pretend I do not have them. I pull down the plastic laundry bag for my dirty clothes. I leave my toothbrush and razor in the bathroom, my wallet and coins in the bedside drawer where they scatter over the Gideons Bible.

*I told u*, she says. *This is not going to accomplish anything.*

*Sarah, I am not out to accomplish anything*, I snap back. *I got nothing left to accomplish. His fault.*

*Dad come on. Just call me.*

My daughter does not ask me to call her anymore, so I sense she is being serious. In fairness, I do not call her much either. I've already explained myself to her. Perhaps I did it too soon, before the wounds had a chance to heal, before

the embarrassment she felt at seeing her father and his company in the papers for such sordid reasons went away, before my own embarrassment at her embarrassment died down, before my fatherly pride reasserted itself.

The embarrassment has finally gone, replaced by sickness. I cannot think about Sarah without feeling awful about how much my material support of her mattered to me. It was easy to take this for granted when I was employed. The cascade of toys, clothes, and vacations. The private high school and college educations. The master's degree—which I gallantly overrode her insistence to pay for herself. All I have to show for these outlays is her disgust. She is a spoiled ingrate. She is completely in the right.

*Maybe later, I say back to her, and turn the phone over.*

§

The conversation with Sarah had happened over dinner, some months but not quite a year after Peters & Mapplethorpe had closed its doors. She and her boyfriend met me at a small Italian place on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a few blocks from their apartment. I had only met her boyfriend a few times at this point, so I had painfully little time to make an impression.

After I sold my home near Albany, I had this vague notion of returning to New York City. Decades ago I had started my career there with nothing to my

name except my state school accounting degree, a couple department store suits, and a few hundred dollars in a savings account. I worked ninety-hour weeks in the tall skyscraper of a large firm that would later become part of what are now called the Big Four. I shuttled regularly between JFK Airport and Kansas City, where I audited the financials of a large grain trading company, parsing a head-spinning array of forwards, futures, and other concepts I only pretended to fully understand.

There was a certain romance in the prospect of returning to my old stomping grounds, of being close to Sarah while her mother lived on the other side of the country. However, I had lived in New York before it became a sterilized paradise. My return was not as grand as I envisioned. I moved into a month-to-month hotel arrangement as I searched for an apartment. But no landlord would look at me without an income, even when I handed them pages and pages of my cashed-out retirement accounts which at that time still had six-figure balances. The ones who offered me space were leasing glorified closets at unconscionable prices. The job market was no easier. I figured that some company would need a number-cruncher—I would even settle for a title like “accounting manager” or “principal revenue analyst” when I had served as a

senior partner at a prestigious mid-sized firm. They all thought I was overqualified. Too old. Or perhaps morally reprehensible.

Two months into my frustrated search, I suspected that this dinner was an act of pity or charity. I had no intention of letting them pay the bill. My pressed, navy blazer sharply creased gray slacks and neat white pocket square were a statement of defiance, a notice that I could still afford to look respectable. Her boyfriend's wrinkled black sweater and scraggly neckbeard were an insult. She was in between these poles, dressed casually but in a manner which suggested time and choice. She had the neat, straight auburn hair which on my own head had gone thin and gray. She resembled me much more than she did her mother.

"So, Dad..." she said, and I could tell what she was dying to ask. Could tell that she was begging me to address it first, because for her to do so would be impossibly awkward, and because they were my supposed lapses, not hers. I went into dinner determined to not say anything, as if to assert that I was more than just the scandal. But I quickly realized this would be pointless.

"I had nothing to do with anything that asshole George Peters did," I said, and the mood at the table went cold. I stalled by swallowing a forkful of

chicken Milanese and taking a sip of wine. "Is that what you were going to ask me?"

I knew my daughter and could tell she was not immediately relieved. Her boyfriend stared uncomfortably down at his plate, but his fork was not moving.

"You can read that report they did. My name's not in there. I never harassed anyone, or made passes at people your age, or whipped my dick out, or anything like that."

Sarah settled into a pained look, which I thought my pronouncement would make less likely.

"I never thought you would have done anything like that, Dad," she said. "I hope you didn't think I was going to accuse you of anything like that."

"Then what's the problem?"

I was causing her discomfort, and for the first time in my life I was not upset about it. This was exactly what would bring out the questions she'd been dying to ask but had felt too pious to raise.

"I don't think you did that," she repeated. "But I do wonder whether you knew what he was doing."

"You think I would have put up with that on my watch?"

“Dad, you’re missing the point,” and I could tell the brakes were off, the holds that were barred were no longer so. “You and Mr. Peters ran the company—with others, yes, I know. What happened was on your collective watch. Would you have let it pass in an audit if one of your clients had stolen a bunch of money and the CFO had claimed ignorance?”

“I never pretended George—Mr. Peters was the nicest guy in the world,” I said. “But he gave me a shot.”

“That’s an excuse you’re making.”

“If I had seen him take his...you know, if I had seen that I would have told him to cut it the hell out.”

“But would you have?”

“I’m not saying—”

“You’re being really defensive about all of this,” Sarah said.

“You’re goddamn right I am, you’re accusing me of letting this all go under my watch!”

“I promise you I don’t think you did anything like that yourself,” Sarah said, her voice high and her eyes wide. “But I am saying this is more complicated than you are making it out to be. Do you think some young female employee was going to come complain to you about what Mr. Peters did? Of

course not—they would think you two were working together! If my boss was hitting on me, do you think I would go immediately to the douchebag tech bros who run my company?”

The boyfriend chose that moment to chime in. “Your dad knows how we met, right? You used to complain to me about those guys all the time. Aren’t you glad I didn’t narc on you to the bosses?”

He laughed, but Sarah did not.

I stopped chewing. “Sarah, I hired a lawyer. I was prepared to say whatever I needed to if it meant Mr. Peters got what was owed to him. And he didn’t—he got off easy.”

“But this is about more than Mr. Peters,” Sarah said. “There’s a system at work here. You’re a powerful, older white man, working with other old and powerful white men. You have so many things that you don’t even *see*. And as far as I know you didn’t do anything to work against that, to unwind your own advantage even a little bit to see just what was being done to people with less power than you. That’s not on Mr. Peters. That’s on you.”

I had a million defenses ready. A hundred lines I could have said to put her in her place. But I did not say anything, giving her words time to find space in my mind.

“Sarah, you’re smarter than I ever was,” I said. It was a line I had used before, when I needed to get her back on my side. “Suppose that’s all true, and suppose I feel quite bad about it. How do I make it right? How can I get Peters what’s coming to him?”

Sarah looked more uncomfortable than ever. “You can’t undo everything. This isn’t something where you can move some money from one column to another to make it right.”

“I’m going to find Peters when he gets out,” I said. “I’ll show him.”

“This whole thing he did was about *violence*,” Sarah said. “He inflicted violence on people. You don’t even know their names! That’s the point. Hunting down Mr. Peters is just going to create more violence. It’s just going to make the original problem worse.”

Again, I did not respond to this. I wanted her to know I was listening. And I was—but I could already feel the beginnings of the process by which my beliefs, after sustaining a blow, would reassemble and reinforce themselves against her words. My counterarguments, unsaid, were being applied like wet cement to a barricade which would harden and strengthen.

“Listen, I didn’t come to dinner just to relitigate all of this,” I said. “I love you, and I owe you a fair explanation of what I believe I have and have not

done, which I think I have given. I appreciate that you are trying to help me become a better person. You've already done that more than I deserve."

At last, I saw the look of discomfort melt reluctantly from Sarah's face, and the conversation pivoted to my apartment search, shared gripes about high rent and unresponsive landlords, the latest Broadway shows we wanted to see. The cement was drying. For once, I could not figure out what my daughter was thinking—whether she found my penance offering touching, or, as she felt those days about anything vaguely religious, just so many empty words.

## §

Somewhere along the line, some of that cement had chipped away, as it does with many things. I am parked on a tree-lined street where the houses have narrow, overgrown lawns, and the property on my right has a fieldstone retaining wall which looks ripe to collapse. It is across the road from what I understand is Peters' house. I feel a small sense of satisfaction that he finds himself somewhere far from the rich neighborhood.

I sit low in my seat, not wanting him to recognize me when he comes out, but he does not emerge. I think back to the map and address I left at the hotel and remind myself that this is indeed his house. It is white, almost a ranch

except for one second-floor room with a dormer window poking out above the front door. There is a car parked on the street. Surely he is home.

After all he had done, after his company had fallen apart and he'd gone to jail and his reputation was left shredded, George could still afford to disappear into some nameless Scranton suburb. Unlike me, he could afford a house, and he drove a nicer car than I did. Perhaps he went out to the movies every few weeks. Did his groceries on Sundays. Lived what would appear to all the world to be a normal life. Would anyone think to pick up a newspaper and find out who he was? Did he even go by George Peters anymore? His mailbox, aside from the street number, showed nothing.

He had all of this because of me. Because I had been too blind or cowardly or ignorant to stop him sooner.

Last night, after I had arrived in the hotel, I had called Sarah back as I'd promised, but it had been a short conversation. I told her I had tracked George down. What, she asked, did I intend to do now that I had found him? I did not know, I said, and I could tell she did not believe me. She repeated that word that had been so central to what she'd said at our dinner. *Violence*. It was a peculiar fascination we had as men, she said, to exact violence to make right

for other violence. I insisted I did not know what I wanted to do yet. I just wanted to talk, to make some things clear.

Have you told Mom where you are? she asked me. She meant this as a provocation. I have not told my ex-wife where I am. She and I have not spoken since I lost my job. She had not given me the privilege, like our daughter had, of explaining what I had and had not done. I am sure she assumed I was some horrible person who had supported George until the end. Only now, I almost agree with her.

Mom doesn't need to know what I'm doing, I told Sarah, and don't you tell her more than she needs to know.

The record in my phone shows that the conversation lasted just four minutes and thirty-four seconds. I thought it had been longer.

My eyes fly from the screen as Peters exits the front door. I fight the urge to sit up and get a better look. He is wearing a navy windbreaker, which I cannot see up close but which I imagine has the logo of some country club or another embroidered on it. It was a favorite look of his on casual Fridays, and I guess it still is. How, after everything, he has the nerve to leave anything unchanged! His beard, which he had worn bushy and black through his entire career, is different though. It is thinner now, and completely gray, on the cusp

of white. I feel a tingle of something I cannot identify—surprise? disgust?—knowing that, even amid his other terrifying habits, he must have colored it artificially to make himself look younger at work.

Alongside him walks his wife. I thought I'd known Frances well, speaking with her every year at company Christmas parties and visiting her home during the summer. Her old-fashioned golden-brown perm and colorful floral wardrobe were a dependable presence in my mind. It is only now that I am struck by how little I must have known about her. If anyone was privy to Peters' deeds, surely she was. Had she ever suspected anything? Did her continued marriage indicate she was perfectly fine with these things?

Is she a survivor too?

I wait for them to enter their car, and as they pull away, I start my own.

## §

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment where I started to feel like I was responsible for what George had done. Where I began to agree with what my ex-wife believed, with what I could almost hear her telling older single men on dates: *oh, Roger, I don't even talk to him anymore, his whole company went down in flames because the head honcho was a sex predator, all while Roger looked on and pretended nothing was happening.*

Beliefs are funny this way. I could not tell you the date I decided to vote for one party or the other for the rest of my life, or that I wanted to become an accountant, or that I didn't really believe in God anymore. I would have said I believed these things my whole life, but of course there was a time when I went to church every week with my mother, when I thought pilots and astronauts had the best jobs ever, when I didn't know what a Democrat or a Republican was.

I had spent long hours alone for the first time in my life after both my marriage and job had disappeared. Could the first rumblings have come to me then, on the quiet weekends when my only daughter was gone and my ex-wife had fled to California? I think this gives me too much credit. I remember thinking, when the whole thing had come down, that this had to be a misunderstanding. There was no way Peters could have done all those things and hidden them from me. The realization must have come slowly. The small needles of the truth nipping and tucking into the deep thoughts of a restless night, the hiss of steam heat and the clangor of pipes keeping me from sleep.

Before I saw him walk out onto the street in his new anonymous life in Pennsylvania, I had a clear picture of Peters sitting in his office, his beard uniformly black, his thick squarish Eighties glasses sitting on his nose. The memory comes back to me again, as it did during those late nights.

It had to be over a decade ago. I was with two other women at my firm, both of whom were significantly younger than me. We were standing outside his office.

“Come in, for Christ’s sake.” His voice was wheezy with cigar smoke.

I opened the door and beckoned my colleagues inside.

As I expected, Peters’ corner office was hazy. A window was cracked, but it made little difference to the translucent gray cloud that enveloped his desk and the three seats lined up in front of it.

Peters looked me over, then stared at his other guests.

“Now why haven’t these ladies been in my office before?” he asked.

There was a suggestive note in his voice, a dash of intrigue and roguishness. My colleagues sat very still, as if on a witness stand.

I was in the left-hand chair, and the woman to my immediate right was named Rebecca Kohler. I know this because I remembered her face. When I lost my job and went looking for a new one, I had reluctantly created a profile

on LinkedIn. I searched for anyone who had ever worked at Peters & Mapplethorpe, and after several pages of scrolling, I recognized her. She had worked at the firm around the time I had dated the memory and had stayed until the firm dissolved. She now worked as the controller for the local humane society.

“I just wanted to make sure you know,” I said, “that we’ve wrapped up the audit for...” (I cannot remember which client it was for) “...which I worked on closely with...” (I cannot actually remember saying their names). “I thought they did a great job and I wanted to tell you as much.”

“That’s wonderful,” Peters said. “Really nicely done. This is Peters & Mapplethorpe, but it should really be Peters & Mapplethorpe & all of you. This is going to make my bonus math a bit easier.”

Oh, the man was a wizard at flattery. That I had not forgotten.

“Are you ladies ready for another project? An old, but very valued client of mine just called me yesterday and needs something important.”

They both nodded, though not, I remember now, enthusiastically.

To Rebecca’s right was Eva Gonzalez. I had looked her up too. She was younger than Rebecca and had just graduated from SUNY Albany with a math degree following a stint in the Navy. She had left the firm not long after that day, and had dropped out of accounting altogether. She was now working in

supply chain management for a big manufacturing company in the area. I wondered—what had she taken away from her surely miserable time at the firm? Had Peters come after her personally? I remember she had been curious and talented. It hurt to see that something might have driven her out of the field.

“Wonderful,” Peters had said. “We’ll start right away. Roger, I think we can handle this one.”

After Peters said this, I stood up to leave. I feel sick at the thought that I hadn’t seen what was going on, had blindly taken direction and left Rebecca and Eva alone with the man.

## §

One night after I lost my job, I found myself thinking about that day. I thought to look up Eva on LinkedIn, and felt such a pang of regret that I sent her a message.

*Eva, it’s been a while. I wrote. I’m sure you saw what happened.*

There was a pause of several minutes. I sat there in front of my laptop screen, feeling debased and unworthy. I thought that she must have seen my message, perhaps grown angry at being contacted by someone who she saw as complicit in her suffering, and ignored it.

To my surprise, though, she wrote me back after ten minutes. *Hi Roger. Yes I saw all the news.*

I noted the tone of her message. She had not wished me well or asked how I was. I rushed to write the next note, *I hope you know I wasn't involved in any of that shit Peters did. I've done some thinking and I could have and should have done more to notice him and stop him. I'm really sorry.*

Another pause, where I worried again I might lose her.

*For the record I really enjoyed working with you and hope you've found success in a new career,* I followed up after another minute.

I cringed at my own words. They felt so cloying, so wrong coming from my hands. But they had the intended effect.

*I appreciate the note. We can't take back what happened but your words are good to hear. I got a copy of the full report so I know everything.*

I nearly cried with relief. She would have looked through and would not have seen my name.

*I read it too, as I'm sure you guessed. Awful.*

*Yes. Did you know Peters tried to reach out to me too? Sent me a weird text right after he supposedly got out of the big house. Wanted to see me.*

A spike of shock and disgust was immediately followed by a surge of anxious interest.

*Ugh, that's real scummy, I'm sorry to hear that. I've been trying to find him. Have a few things I need to get off my chest. I don't think he's in Albany anymore.*

*I know, Eva said. He mentioned somewhere in Pennsylvania. I can give you the name of the place.*

My heart thundering, I made sure to write down the name of the town correctly, thanking Eva profusely for her lead and wishing her well.

Knowing that even after his term in prison, Peters had continued to try to prey upon his former employees, made me even sicker. I remembered how I had closed the door to Peters' office without a second thought. And in the dim light of my computer, the last message to Eva flashing on screen, I wept openly and uncontrollably for the first time since my divorce.

After I stopped crying, I expected to feel better, naively thinking my messages to Eva might bleach some dark spot on my conscience. But I only felt hollow.

I lower the seat of my car so that I only just see over the steering wheel, taking care not to lose sight of Peters' car as it approaches the center of town. I hang back, and watch him park alongside a connected row of shops on the main street, which share a façade of refurbished brick. In another age, these might have been drug stores, five and dimes, laundromats. Some remain empty, but others have begun their slow transformation into coffee shops, craft breweries, knitting boutiques, and other signs of the migrating gentry who want to take their urban luxuries with them. He jaywalks with his wife across the street and enters a restaurant—which looks old enough to have been an original staple of the town. I exhale, and I wait.

*Dad plz call me.*

It is Sarah again. I look down at our exchange of messages, which I had initiated that morning. I do not respond.

She follows up quickly. *Dad whatever you're doing just call me.*

*Not doing anything,* I say back to her.

After a short wait, third message comes in succession. *Dad, you are not going to solve everything that happened with more violence.*

*An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, blah blah blah,* I text her back. *Who said anything about violence?*

I think of my daughter and her slob of a boyfriend, cosseted somewhere in their New York City apartment, with nothing in their past to worry about. They don't know regret. Worse, they don't *know* that they don't. They think having to cancel that trip to the Caribbean is regret. They didn't close the door to Peters' office and walk away.

Nevertheless, my daughter has succeeded in getting me to wait a few extra seconds. I wonder how much to tell her. I could tell her, as I expect she wants to hear, that I am not going to do something silly like kill George Peters. All I want to do is talk. But I keep her in suspense.

My car door opens, and I climb out and cross the empty street. I peek between curtains into the restaurant and see him at a table in the middle of the room, buttering his bread as if nothing at all had ever happened to him.

I expect to walk in. I expect to see a look of shock on his face, now gray-bearded and wrinkled with stress. I expect him to say my name. *Roger*, I can almost hear in his raspy cigar-stained voice. I expect his wife to look at me, perhaps without recognition, but to mirror the surprised expression of her husband. I expect to tell him in no uncertain terms how I feel. I expect him not to apologize directly, but to involuntarily show some hint of remorse.

I enter the restaurant, and immediately it is wrong.

The hostess welcomes me and asks me if I'm a party of one. I march past her towards Peters and his wife, who are among the only patrons in the quiet dining room. He sees me, and there is no look of shock. His wife does not even react, but goes on eating. He does not address me. He barely looks into my eyes. And I am struck by the incredible *normality* of all of it. How little everything seems to have changed him. The fact that no evidence of the destroyed lives or the demolished company or the disgraced colleagues seems to reflect in his face. He is only slightly more wrinkled than when I last saw him. He has not had sleepless nights, fretting as I did over my role in all of it, wondering whether any human alive would dare to look at me again, hoping that my own daughter would listen to my mewling confession and still care about me. He has not done any of this, and suddenly it infuriates me.

I dive over the table. I finally see the look of shock, hear the shriek of surprise, as my right fist glances across his bearded jaw. It is not a direct hit. I swing for another one, but the table wobbles back toward me and I am thrown away from him onto the floor. The table falls on top of me. I try to push it off, but the busboys and waiters and hostess have come to subdue me. I let them pin me down. I hear a desperate phone call, and a short time later, sirens on the main street. I hear the restaurant doors kicked open, feel my wrists forced

together at my waist. As I am hoisted to my feet, I see Peters, dusting himself off, bearing no visible sign he had just been attacked.

### §

On the way to the police station I feel, for the first time since I succeeded in tracking down Peters, a thrill of fear. Even after I had lost my job, blamed myself for everything that had gone wrong, I reassured myself with the knowledge that no crime had been formally imputed to me. That was now gone, and without that netting to fall back into, my mind began to explore a dark range of possibilities.

What if I went to jail? Never saw my daughter again? Or worse yet, earned her permanent disapproval for the rest of my life?

I think of Peters' sentence. Three years for many lives' worth of trauma, and until I had found him, an undisturbed retirement in a quiet, affordable suburb. I figure the small bruise I had left on his jaw (if I had even the strength to leave one) would surely get me less. But that assumed the world was fair, and that I could afford a lawyer that would get me off on a misdemeanor with community service. It also, on the other hand, assumed Peters would press charges. Would he want to sacrifice his privacy, risk luring the papers back with a salacious story of revenge gone wrong, just to ensure I got a fine or a

few months in jail? Perhaps he had an ounce of guilt and could understand what was coming to him.

The ride to the station is short, but I am already feeling better when we arrive. The cement is being applied to the barricade again. I am convinced that I will not end up in jail—at least not for long. I will post bail and return to my hotel to take a shower. I will see my daughter again. It is exhilarating knowing I had come face-to-face with Peters, had shown him what I thought of him, and had—despite the grazing punch—largely succeeded in what I'd set out to do. Though I had said nothing to him. Had not heard him confess, or deny his actions, or try to justify them, or tell me to go to hell.

What feels worse, though, is the prospect of having to explain to Sarah what I'd done. I think of lying. I would tell her that Peters and I had exchanged some heated words and gone our separate ways. But if my crime ends up as a matter of public record, she could find out, and that would definitely be it between us.

I could call her and talk everything through, once I have been safely discharged. I picture the angry questions, anticipate the "I told you so" scolding. We will talk for at least an hour. I am sure she will tell her mother, who will

send me a furious email for supposedly making her look bad (though she will not answer my attempted phone calls).

Or I could not call at all. I could fade into obscurity, as I have already done for my ex-wife, and as I suspect my daughter prefers, even before she finds out I am a common criminal. I could accept the fact that my lot in life is to be known as someone who, in the opinion of the small number of people who cared, had done nothing to stop Peters and had cloaked myself in privilege to escape punishment. And regardless of whether that is correct, I can accept that it is fair. I can accept that it is fair.

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