

NOTHING PERSONAL

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ONE

JOEY DEPINO WAS the only gambler at the Meadowlands braving the frigid night to watch the last race outside. He was standing by the rail near the finish line in his stone-washed jeans and his blue-and-red New York Giants official team winter jacket. When the white pace car sped past with the long starting gate, he yelled, 'Leave with him, Cat Man!' hoping to see his eight horse and Catello Manzi sprinting for the lead. But Manzi was either in on a fix or the damn horse just didn't want to run, because the eight was last, in the middle of the track, looking lame as the pacers rounded the first turn.

'Cocksucker!' Joey screamed.

He tossed his program away over his shoulder and headed toward the grandstand. The bus to Manhattan left at twenty minutes after the last race and he wanted to get a jump on the crowd.

The Meadowlands had been modernized a few years ago, but putting in some snazzy new restaurants and shining up the floors hadn't made much of a difference. The whole place still had a run-down feel to it, mainly because of the crowd. Angry old men, huddled in small groups, stood cursing at the television sets that were showing the closed-circuit broadcast of the race. The floor was covered with losing tickets, spilled beer, and spit; the air was a haze of cigarette smoke. At thirty-five, Joey was probably one of the youngest guys at the track, but years of gambling had made him look as old and beat-up as everyone else. He had dark bags under his eyes and most of his hair had fallen out. He used to lift weights, but that was a long time ago, when he still lived in Brooklyn; now he couldn't remember the last time he had set foot in a gym.

Tonight had cost Joey three hundred and sixty bucks, not including the price of three hot dogs, two slices of pizza and one Carvel ice cream cone. But this was only pocket change compared to the over nine grand he owed to three bookies and one loan shark. Because the bookies had stopped taking action from him, he had started to bet under phony names. But even 'Tony' and 'Nick' and 'Vinnie' had tapped out their figures. He had zero money in the bank and with rent and bills coming up he had no idea what new story he'd make up to tell his wife Maureen.

At a television set above the betting windows, Joey stopped to watch the end of the race. His horse still wasn't in the picture. He couldn't remember the last time he'd left a racetrack with money in his wallet. Was it last month? Last year? He felt numb and exhausted; it seemed like he hadn't had a good night's sleep in months.

As the pacers turned into the stretch, the eight finally appeared on the screen. Manzi was moving the horse up on the rail, but seemed hopelessly boxed-in. In the stretch, he angled the horse off the rail, then he got shut off again. He dropped back on the inside, but he was still blocked. Joey was ready to walk away when Manzi somehow got loose. He steered the horse to the outside and started closing like a freight train. It still didn't look like he'd get up in time, but the horse in front was staggering. Joey didn't even have time to scream. Manzi's horse seemed to be moving twice as fast as the other horses, and he surged to the lead at the wire. It would be a photo finish but it was obvious that the eight had won the race.

In an instant, Joey calculated his winnings. At sixty-five to one, the eight was the second longest shot in the field. He had bet forty dollars to win and had played the eight in a forty dollar daily double with the winner of the last race. All together, he would get back over \$17,600.

He was too shocked to celebrate. He walked around the grandstand, breathing heavily, hoping he wouldn't have a heart attack and die with the winning tickets in his

pocket. He still couldn't believe the eight had actually won. Joey DePino, the guy his friends in Brooklyn used to call 'Joey the Jinx' because he always lost at the track, actually getting home a sixty-five-to-one shot? There had to be some mistake. This was 'Candid Camera' and that guy with the gray hair was gonna come out and shake his hand.

He already had the money spent. Nine grand would go toward his debts. The other eight would go into the bank, maybe toward a down payment on a house in Staten Island or Jersey. Maureen had been begging him to move into a nicer place for years and he was sick of living in the city. He wanted to live in a place where he could own a car so he wouldn't have to take buses to the racetrack anymore.

Then the crowd started to jeer. Joey felt the Carvel and hot dogs collapsing in his stomach. He ran to the nearest TV monitor, afraid to see what he already knew.

The food dropped another couple of inches when he saw the INQUIRY sign on the tote board.

When the eight horse had made that move to lead, Manzi had cut off the horses to his outside. Joey had seen this clearly, but he had blocked it out in his excitement. Now he prayed to God for a miracle. Joey was half Jewish, half Italian, and he didn't believe in religion, but he swore to God he would pray every day for the rest of his life if He would just put up the fucking OFFICIAL sign.

Sometimes the judges took five minutes or longer to decide whether a horse should be disqualified. Maybe tonight they were tired and wanted to go home because in less than a minute the tote board went blank and the revised order of finish was posted. The eight had been placed fourth.

Joey's horses had been disqualified before, but never for this much money and never when he needed the money this badly. He asked God what he had ever done to deserve this treatment and, as usual, he didn't get any answer.

Slowly, he walked toward the exit. He tried to tell himself that he wasn't any worse off than he'd been five minutes ago. But all he could think about was the damn INQUIRY sign and how nothing ever seemed to go right in his life. He was walking unsteadily. A few people bumped into him, saying 'excuse me' or 'sorry,' but he didn't even seem to notice.

Leaving the grandstand, heading down the long ramp, Joey felt like he could lie down and sleep forever. But, typical of his luck, the bus had already filled and he had to stand the whole way back to Manhattan.

TWO

'COME HERE,' DAVID Sussman said, unzipping his pants.

Amy Lee put down the bottle of Bud Light she'd been drinking and started kissing David hard, pushing him back onto his desk.

A few nights a week for the past month or so, David and Amy stayed late at the R.L. Dwyer Advertising Agency on East Fifty-first Street, where they both worked, and had sex in David's office. Like the other flings he'd had during his marriage, David had figured that he and Amy would fool around a few times and then the affair would end painlessly. But David's previous affairs had been during business trips, far away from New York, and he hadn't anticipated all the complications of an office romance. He had to keep seeing Amy every day, smelling her perfume, and then there was the Chinese factor. David had always fantasized about having sex with an Asian woman and, although Amy was born and raised in Astoria, Queens, David still thought of her as 'exotic.' But lately his exotic image of Amy was wearing thin. He'd been feeling more and more guilty, thinking about his wife and ten-year-old daughter at home, and he'd decided that after tonight he'd definitely tell Amy the affair was over.

Although he went running three mornings a week and did sit-ups and crunches every night before bed, David still felt that he could stand to lose a few inches off of his waistline. He was six-one, had a long, gangly body, and dark curly hair. The summer before he'd left for college at Albany, he had gone to a plastic surgeon in his home town of Dix Hills, Long Island, and had excess cartilage removed from the tip of his nose. By the next summer, the nosejob had 'caved in' and he thought he looked worse than before the

operation. The surgeon couldn't guarantee that additional surgery would solve the problem so David continued to go through life obsessed with his appearance.

'Shit, it's after ten o'clock,' David said, unconsciously sucking in his stomach as he pulled on his boxers.

'Come back down here,' Amy said, grabbing his leg.

Wriggling free, David said, 'Seriously, I have to get out of here. I told Leslie I'd be home by nine.'

'Are we ever going to spend a whole night together?'

'Just get dressed,' David said, finding his pants on the floor. He wanted to break the news to her now, but he wanted to make sure the words came out right. He'd always had trouble breaking up with women. He'd met his wife in college. Before that, he'd only had a couple serious girlfriends, and he never broke up with any of them. Either he would get dumped or he'd just start acting like an asshole until the girl finally got the message.

'My mother wants to meet you,' Amy said.

'Your mother?'

'She asked me if I've been dating anybody lately.'

'We're not dating,' David said. He held up his hand, displaying his gold wedding band. 'See? This means I'm officially unavailable for dating.'

'I told her I'd bring you home to Queens sometime.'

'Very funny,' David said, hoping Amy was joking. 'Come on, let's get a move on.'

'You're so sexy when you're nervous.'

David looked down at Amy, still lying nude on the floor. He couldn't help noticing her flat stomach and the way no fat hung off of her twenty-six-year-old thighs.

'I think we should talk.'

'I'm not in the mood to talk.'

'How long has this been going on?'

'Fuck me again.'

David loved it when Amy talked dirty. It usually gave him an instant hard-on, but this time he tried to hold back his excitement.

'I'm serious,' David said, buttoning his shirt. 'I've been thinking - maybe we shouldn't do this anymore.' It was a relief to finally get those words out. In a way, he felt as if just saying this negated the whole affair. It had never happened and now he had nothing to feel guilty about.

'I know you don't want to do that,' Amy said.

'It isn't a matter of what I want.'

'You see, that's what I don't understand about you. When you're working you're so confident. But as soon as the workday ends you're always talking about your wife - your wife this, your wife that. What about you? Are you going to spend your whole life being miserable just to make someone else happy?'

'Who ever said I was miserable?'

'What if you weren't married and there were two doors? I was behind one door and your wife was behind the other? Whichever door you opened, you'd be with that person for the rest of your life. Which door would you choose?'

Thinking that he probably wouldn't choose either door, David said, 'I don't have time for this.'

'I'm making it easy for you,' Amy said in a breathy, Marilyn Monroe voice, spreading her legs farther apart. 'My door's already opened.'

'Put on your clothes,' David said seriously. He wound on his tie and started stuffing papers and folders he was bringing home into his briefcase. Amy didn't move off the floor.

'Come home with me.'

'You know I can't do that.'

'You mean won't.'

'Whatever.'

'Don't you want to fuck me in my bed?'

The dirty talk wasn't a turn on anymore. 'Just put on your clothes so I can lock up in here.'

Amy was staring at David, her lips parted slightly. 'You know, the thought of you going back to your wife every night really upsets me,' she said. 'I think about us, how we were, and then I think about you with her and I can't help it - I get very angry at you.'

'Look, it's over, all right?' David said. 'I hate to put it like that, but it's the truth. We had some fun, but now we have to go on with our lives. That's just the way it is.'

David looked away from Amy, toward the blind-covered window. He hoped she would just leave - end this thing nice and cleanly.

Amy said, 'I thought you said you wanted to marry me.'

'What?' David said, turning around suddenly. 'How the hell did you get that idea?'

'You proposed to me last week.'

David wondered if this could be true. It was possible he'd said something to Amy about marriage - maybe that night last week when he felt confused - but it definitely wasn't a marriage proposal and he definitely hadn't meant it.

'I never said I wanted to marry you,' David said. 'I said "Wouldn't it be nice if we got married someday?" There's a big difference.'

Amy glared at David. David felt like they were strangers on the street, looking at each other for the first time. She said, 'This is a joke, right? You're gaslighting me.'

'Come on,' David said, 'let's try to be mature adults here - '

'Why would you lie to me like this?'

'I didn't lie to you,' David said. 'Maybe you misheard me.'

'I know what I heard - I'm not crazy. You were standing right where you are. You said, "Will you marry me someday?"'

'But I'm already married. Why would I say that?'

'That's a good question.'

David looked away from Amy then he looked back at her and said, 'Come on, get dressed. It's past eleven already.'

'So let me get this straight,' Amy said with a fake smile. 'You don't want to marry me. I suppose you don't love me either. And what else did you tell me that night? Oh, that's right, that I'm "the most beautiful, most exciting" woman you've ever met. I guess you didn't mean those things either.'

'I never said any of that.'

Amy had started to cry. David stood next to his desk, looking down at her. She was still on the floor, naked, her head between her knees. David watched her for about a minute - first noticing how incredible she looked, then thinking about how crazy this situation was getting. Finally he said, 'Come on, get dressed. This isn't doing either of us any good.'

Amy looked up at David. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were lined with mascara. 'You meant all of this, didn't you?' she said. 'You just want to pretend we never met.'

David let out a deep breath then said, 'I guess we can still say hi in the hallways.'

Amy shook her head several times, then she stood up off the floor. She started to get dressed, pulling on her panties.

'I'm not desperate, you know,' she said. 'There are a lot of other guys I can be with right now, so you can just stop this high-on-your-horse, I'm-so-much-better-than-you routine because I couldn't care less.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Fuck your sorries.' She hooked on her bra. 'You're not in control here, Mr. I Think I'm So Desirable, Mr. Married Man. What if I called your wife right now?'

Amy looked ugly - her eyes glazed, her nostrils flaring.

'Look, I said I was sorry.'

'I can do it, you know. I can pick up the phone right now and tell your wife everything. I'll give her a blow-by-blow report of everything we've done together.'

'I think you've made your point.'

'861-4735.'

David stared at Amy, hoping she would smile, but she didn't. His home number wasn't listed and he had no idea how she'd gotten it.

'Look, I think this is starting to get out of hand,' David said. 'It's late and we've both had long days -'

Buttoning up her blouse, Amy said, 'Tell me that you love me.'

'What?'

'I don't care what you say, I know you love me. If you're honest and admit that we're in love maybe I won't call your little wifey tomorrow.'

'This is a joke, right? You're kidding.'

'I want you to say I love you.'

'I don't love you.'

'Say it, David.'

'I don't love you. I love my wife.'

'So I guess you're ready to just flush your marriage down the toilet.'

Amy had put on her skirt and now she was putting on bright red lipstick, looking at herself in a compact mirror.

'You better not call her.'

'You better tell me you love me.'

David grabbed Amy's arm. He realized he was squeezing too hard and let go.

'Please,' he said, trying a different tack. 'Look, if things were different - if I was younger, if I was single - then maybe it would be possible. But I made it clear, at least I thought I made it clear, that this wasn't going to be serious.'

'I know what you said, and I know what I heard.'

'Well you didn't hear right.'

'Do you have any messages?'

'Messages?'

'...You want me to give Leslie. And Jessica. That's your daughter's name, isn't it?'

David couldn't remember ever telling Amy about his daughter. Amy tried to get by. David grabbed her arm again and held her.

'All right,' he said. 'If I say it, you swear you'll never call my wife?'

'I swear.'

'Are you crossing your fingers?'

David let Amy go and she held up her hands. With his eyes closed, David said, 'I love you.'

'Who do you love?'

'For God's sake -'

'Say 'I love you, Amy.''

'Jesus Chri -'

'I'll call your wife and daughter.'

David noticed how the whites of Amy's eyes were visible all around her pupils.

'I love you, Amy.'

'That's better. Now we're starting to make some progress.'

WHEN AMY LEFT HIS OFFICE, David went right to the mini-refrigerator behind his desk and opened a bottle of Bud Light. He drank half the bottle without pausing for air. He still couldn't believe what had just happened. It was as if the past few weeks with Amy were a pleasant dream that suddenly turned into an all-out nightmare. He realized that the whole situation was mostly his fault. He had definitely led her on, made a few promises he couldn't keep, but how did he know she was going to snap?

Amy had only been with the agency for six months and David realized that he hardly knew her. She had once mentioned something about 'seeing a shrink,' which in itself didn't mean anything, but what if she had major psychological problems? All David knew about Amy was that she was from Astoria, that her parents had divorced when she was very young, and that she went to college at Parsons School of Design. Sometimes she spoke about past relationships, but always in vague terms. She would say, 'This guy I went out with in college...' or 'I was seeing this guy for a few weeks and so and so...' But she never mentioned any of her friends or relatives by name or talked about what she did in her spare time. David knew she lived in the Village, but he didn't know if it was the West Village or the East Village, not to mention what street she lived on.

David tried to remember why he had gotten involved with Amy in the first place and his mind came up blank. Just thinking about her gave him a sick empty feeling in the middle of his stomach. No matter what, he decided, this was going to be the last affair he'd ever have. Affairs were too stressful and they weren't helping him the way they used to. They weren't enjoyable and they certainly weren't making him feel any younger.

David left his office, locked the door, and went down the quiet, carpeted hallway to the men's room. After he peed, he washed up and straightened his shirt collar and brushed off the arms of his sports jacket. As usual, the only thing he saw in the mirror was a bad nosejob. But then he moved closer to the glass and studied his forehead wrinkles and eye lines. New signs of middle age seemed to appear on his face every day.

He was trying to cut down on drinking and junk food and he drank two ounces of wheatgrass juice every day during lunch. He took a wide assortment of vitamins, including super anti-oxidants such as CQ-10, cat's claw, and shark cartilage. He also took dosages of flaxseed oil and sprinkled bee pollen onto his cereal every morning.

If these so-called aging remedies accomplished anything David couldn't see the results. Sometimes he would stare at himself in the mirror and be astonished at how tired and leathery he looked. But nothing was worse than the surge of horror he would feel when he realized that in just three years he would turn forty. Forty had always seemed light years away, at the end of the universe, and it was incomprehensible to him that a man who felt so young could actually be on the brink of middle age.

Riding down in the elevator, David imagined what a disaster it would be if Amy called Leslie. Leslie had a very conservative attitude about marriage. Once, a friend of hers had discovered that her husband was cheating and Leslie said that the friend was 'crazy for staying with him.' When she saw movies or TV shows that dealt with adulterous men, she always called the men 'bastards' or 'pigs,' and she'd once warned David flat-out that she would leave him if he ever cheated on her.

Suddenly, David felt dizzy. The walls of the elevator seemed to be closing in on him. He dropped to his knees and tried to catch his breath. When the doors opened in the lobby he got up slowly, then he stood outside the elevator, supporting himself against the marble wall. He'd had panic attacks on and off for most of his life, but lately they were getting worse.

A minute or two passed and his strength returned. He wobbled through the lobby out to Second Avenue. The frigid wind stung his face and blew dust into his eyes. He walked with his chin tucked under his overcoat collar, his hand out to hail a taxi. As usual, a few cabs passed inexplicably, then one finally picked him up.

Staring out at the dark, nearly deserted East Side streets and the dense clouds of sewer smoke billowing out of the manhole covers depressed David even more. All it would take was one phone call, and even if Amy didn't call Leslie tonight, she could call her some other time. David considered beating Amy to it, telling Leslie about the affair as soon as he got home. Or, better yet, he could warn Leslie that some crazy woman might be calling - someone whom he'd fired last week - and to ignore everything she said.

She was psychotic, he'd tell her - right out of a mental institution. But Leslie was too smart for that. Just mentioning the subject of affairs would lead to endless probing and Leslie could always tell when David was lying.

David knew that Amy could ruin his entire life if she wanted to. He was Senior Marketing Manager and Amy was a graphic artist. Although they worked in completely different departments, technically, she was lower on the company totem pole. David didn't know whether this could constitute an harassment case or not, but he realized how moronic it was for him to even get into such a predicament. At least he'd been smart enough to use rubbers.

As the cab sped up Third Avenue, weaving in and out of traffic as if on the Indianapolis Speedway, David felt a click in his chest - mitral valve prolapse syndrome - the first signal of a new panic attack coming on. As his heart started to race, he drew his attention inward, focussing on his breathing. 'In, out, in, out,' he whispered. The technique worked and suddenly things didn't seem nearly as bad as they had a few seconds earlier.

'This is it, on the right,' David said to the cab driver.

The cab pulled in front of David's building on East Seventy-ninth Street. Walking confidently into the wood-paneled lobby, David greeted Tom, his doorman, with a warm smile. It felt good to be in the protected domain of a luxury apartment building where nothing could ever harm him. The elevator ride to the nineteenth floor didn't cause him any discernible panic.

As usual, Leslie had left the living-room light on, and it felt warm and relaxing to be in his apartment. In addition to the living room and the three bedrooms - David used the third bedroom as his office - there was a dining room, two bathrooms, a terrace and an eat-in kitchen. After drinking a glass of apple juice, he went down the hallway to Jessica's room. He tip-toed up to her bed where she was sleeping, then kissed her lightly on the forehead. She stirred, rolling on to her side.

'I love you, daddy.'

'I love you too, pumpkin. Sleep tight.'

David washed up - trying not to notice the deepening wrinkles under his eyes - and put on a clean pair of underwear. The quiet in the apartment was calming, refreshing. Leslie was sleeping soundly so David decided not to wake her. He moved against her, spooning her body, and wedging his face against the back of her soft neck. It was comforting, smelling the peach odor of her moisturizing cream and feeling his heart beating steadily against her back. Only when he thought about Amy Lee, and her crazed, staring eyes, did he start to panic again.

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