

Straight and Narrow

A knock came at the door.

"Annie? Annie are you in there?"

"I'm here, Dad."

John Boswell pushed the wide door open slowly with his hand. It opened without a sound. The machines in the room whirred and beeped, maintaining the rhythm of life. Annie was reclined in the bed with wires and IV lines snaking everywhere. She lifted her hand haltingly and waved with two fingers.

He stared, started to stutter and move his mouth, then stared again.

"Are you ok?" he said. The machines replied first. *Beep.*

"I am now. The doctors here did a great job. I lost a lot of blood, but it's under control now."

"You said to come to the hospital. I rushed here straight from the 5th tee--" Annie blushed and looked away and John stopped momentarily. "When I got here they sent me to the maternity ward."

"Sit down Dad." *Beep.*

John walked over to all the machines, examining them. He gathered himself a little and turned back towards her. "What in the *hell* is going on."

Annie winced. "Will you sit down, Dad?" she asked.

John turned toward the bed and looked down at her.

"You're ok? You're going to be fine?"

She nodded.

John squared his shoulders still standing over her, folded his arms, and waited.

"Dad, I- I had a baby."

"Well, I figured that much out believe it or not. But I just saw you on winter break. You didn't look knocked up."

"Winter clothes. And that was over 5 months ago."

"So you had a baby."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Annie looked at her father. She took a breath and steadied herself. "I'm not sure what you mean by that."

Another knock came at the door and the nurse entered. "Hello Miss Boswell. I didn't know you had a visitor, I just need to check your numbers again."

"Leave," said John. The nurse gave him a look, but ignored him and started fiddling with the machines next to her bed. *Beep.*

"Sir, I'll just be a minute, she needs her IV and vitals checked every hour after the opera—".

"Get out!" John shouted.

"Dad!"

"Sir! If you yell again, I'll have to call security. I'm almost done." John moved to the window and waited. The nurse fiddled some more with the IV machine. "There, done. Do you need anything else Miss Boswell?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Just press that button if you need to call me- or anyone." And she left, staring after John and closing the big room door silently.

"You never yell in front of anyone else." Annie said, shocked. She waited a minute but John said nothing. "Can we try this again Dad? I had a baby. It's a boy, and he's

beautiful. He's in the NICU right now - he's small and he's had some apnea, so the nurses are checking on him while I recover. But in another day or two he should be fine to sleep on his own."

She paused for a second. "His name is Robert John. Do you want to meet your grandson?"

She waited to see if the name or the idea of a grandson would soften her father's mood, but she saw no difference. That had been her mother's idea. Give him some ownership, some power in the situation. Let him be in charge. But this whole thing seemed to have unwound too fast for John to calm down. Calling him in from the golf course had been a tactical mistake.

"You're, what, nineteen years old? How the hell did you let this happen?" John asked, ignoring the idea of his grandson.

"I'm twenty Dad, remember? You sent me flowers in March," Annie said.

"There's not much I can do about you messing around off at college, but Jesus you could at least take care of it! This is a mess!"

"Take care of it?" Annie looked at her father for a minute. "You mean have an abortion. That procedure you lobby against on a weekly basis. Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious! Do you realize how many plans and schedules this will change?"

Annie shook her head. "Plans. And schedules."

"Or maybe you were happily unaware of where I was headed later this year. Dammit, I could have prevented this."

"I just had a baby," Annie started yelling, her temper finally escaping her head. "I nearly *bled out* on the bed! I had to have emergency surgery! And all I was supposed to be thinking about was your politics! Oh, what would all the other darling state senators say when your daughter had an illegitimate child?"

"They'll say I have no place going after the Governor's house." John shouted back. "Christ, I'm a Republican! Years of preparation, down the tubes. It's not just me either, these things are one giant conspiracy. A real team effort. We could have gotten some real good done in this state."

"Some *real* good. Well that's just too bad isn't it." Annie said. She was shaking now, trying to hold back.

John stopped yelling and shook his head. "You little brat. You never understood where I was going or what I was trying to do. Did you ever wonder why we only had you? One was enough to be a family and smile for the cameras. Don't get me wrong, we wanted one. Your mother wanted one, the wanting came later for me. You always made a great stage prop. Your mother wanted more, but that was too much. I made her abort the rest. One was plenty.

"Abortion isn't for the Democrats. It's for the Right. You think anybody is really that righteous and good and conservative? They're not. They just hide their mistakes and shame under a veil of smiles and theology and judgement. Abortion is a recovery procedure. It's a way to keep the veil intact- it's how you hide your shame and move on. Look at us now. Look how you've shamed our family."

Annie sobbed openly while her machines beeped, the lines on the display rising higher. "That's all this is then, shame."

"Christ, what else is it? A young, single girl with a baby. Sounds low class. What the hell."

Annie took a deep breath. "I'm engaged." she said. And she held up her hand.

John stared.

"Holy hell", he said. "Who is the father anyway? Same guy you're engaged to? Some schmuck you met in poetry class?"

"It's David, Dad. Robert's son."

John went still, then moved to the door. "Robert's probably on the 7th hole by now. If I hurry, I can catch him for the back nine. I think we need to have a longer chat."

"Dad, wait. Stay another minute." John turned and waited.

"This hasn't gone like I hoped. I –"

"I need to start sorting this all out," John said, cutting her off and walking out.

Annie sobbed for awhile after her father left, trying to get herself together. She looked around at herself again and the state she was in. It was hard not to cry just because of that, nevermind all the confirmation her Dad had just given her. Yes, he was a filthy hypocrite. Yes, the rules didn't apply to him. Yes, he barely loved her, if ever at all, and thought of her as a useful tool in his career. As she got older, she had realized more and more of that was true, but it's still different hearing it said out loud. She had always had a mixture of pride, fear, and apprehension about her father and his goals. But that concoction had been replaced over time with a straight shot of fear, and this made it a double.

And then there were the new details she had learned. She tried to imagine the idea of growing up with brothers or sisters. Now that she'd had a baby, it was hard to think about them any other way than as real people. She had to talk to her Mom, find out more.

After a few more minutes, Annie calmed down enough to call her Mom.

"How did it go, dear?" her Mom asked.

"Horrible. He stormed out. He said a lot of things." Annie took a deep breath. "You had other pregnancies Mom?"

She could hear her Mom deflate through the phone. "Yes, dear, I did. There didn't seem to be any other choice. I had you and I was basically a single parent most of the time, and I didn't know if I could handle more. I'm sorry you found out that way, I should have told you."

"You could've kept going. You could've divorced him."

Her Mom laughed. "He would have *killed* me—" for a second, Annie took her Mom literally, which scared her even more "— and besides, where could I go? We had no prenup. I've never had a job. We would have been on welfare, poor and barely getting by. I couldn't do it. So I stayed and tried to make sure you had the best of everything and that I was always around. I hope that went alright."

Annie smiled. Her Mom had come to every soccer game she could remember. She had always volunteered for field trips, helped with the homework, and she had been president of the PTA to boot. When Annie was younger, she always thought her Mom was just making up for her father's obscene schedule and commitments, but now she realized she was making up for other things too.

"Yes, Mom, it went alright." She thought about her son, sleeping over in the nursery. "I didn't even get to tell him that I had to have a hysterectomy."

"Give it time. His bad reactions will fade. They always do. He really does do a lot of good in our state. He'll come around, eventually."

Annie hung up the phone. She didn't have her Mom's confidence or optimism, but that's one of the things she always loved about her. She had been waiting for John Boswell to come around for twenty five years, and he was still out stomping for good while taking none of it home with him.

The nurse knocked again, then entered carrying a little bundle of blankets.

"Feeding time," she said, smiling.

Annie smiled too and held out her arms. She'd only been able to feed him twice so far - the doctors had been more worried about her body than his it seemed. And with the amount of blood she had lost during the delivery, she supposed that made sense.

She took her son from the nurse and looked down at his face. He was still sleeping. God, he was beautiful. She never knew you could feel like your heart was actually smiling until she held her son. It's amazing what kind of love could come out of a mistake.

Robert John was a mistake. It was true that she partied hard at college. She probably slept with a few too many guys. David's father and her father were the scions of the Florida Republican Party; the chosen sons destined for the Governor's mansion and high federal positions after their state tenure. She had seen David a few times from the political functions she had been forced to attend with her family, but she never really noticed him. He always seems to hate those functions more than her.

Then she saw David at that last party, and over shots of vodka he went from cute to positively breathtaking. The vodka brought them both urgency as well, and so they skipped the condom and rolled around in the early morning on the couch without one. But then morning came and David was still there, and it turned out that he was sweet and funny and smart and courteous in a way that no other one night stand had been. They were a few dates along before she realized she was pregnant. After that they had a lot more to talk about, realized they both had been neglected by a parent growing up (David even more than Annie), decided they could do better, decided they liked each other enough to stick together for the sake of the baby.

"Hello, sleepy head," Annie said to her son, moving her finger at his lips. "Time to eat." Robert opened his eyes briefly, revealing small flashes of blue and infinite possibility.

"Let's see if we can get a good latch this time," the nurse said. Annie undid her gown and held Robert up to her breast to see if he would know what to do. To her surprise, he latched right on and started suckling. Her heart smiled again.

Annie was only twenty. David was twenty one. What was in the past was past. She had always had a vision for a grand life - her father's public life and travels all over the state had seen to that. Her plans now were for something different. She had fumbled into a good guy and a small family. The labor had been brutal and she'd never have more kids. But she loved the one she had. Her new vision for the future didn't sound grand, but it sounded *good*.

John turned his black Suburban into the Kenwood Country Club and trundled up the long drive towards the main clubhouse. He was still fuming over how his morning had gone, but had calmed down enough to keep his profile and drive the casual 20 mph speed limit that all country clubs seem to have. The long drive to the clubhouse at a nice slow speed was like the rhythm of a hypnotist, allowing all the guests to settle into their temporary fantasy world of manicured green, happy distractions, and, above all, wealth.

As he drove, he circulated back to the beginning of his morning again. It had started pleasantly enough on the golf course, his favorite place to think and plan. John and Robert had come up with a new scheme to fuck the state Democrats sideways when they proposed their new budget bill during the next House session and, as an added bonus, it was a different enough tactic from the standard RNC playbook that the federal guys couldn't take credit. So their national notoriety would grow too. Wins all around.

Then the phone call and the hospital trip. Christ, what a mess. His Mask had definitely cracked today. It hadn't broken, not completely, but he had definitely lost his cool. Well, who wouldn't in that situation? His young single daughter, the daughter of a famous politician, had a baby while still in college and out of wedlock and hides the

entire pregnancy from her father. It's no wonder the Mask cracked today. It needed repair, and he needed a plan.

John parked on the far side of the clubhouse, got out, and bypassed the yawning main entrance. Robert would definitely be starting the back nine by now. It was just the two of them today and they had been sharing a golf cart earlier. When he got Annie's phone call, there had been a landscaper out on the 5th hole on the other side of a dune and he had stolen the gardener's cart to rush back to his car (but who cares, what did he pay his exorbitant dues for anyway?) Robert still had the one cart, so he went to the cart area and grabbed a second. They'd each have their own for the back nine.

Annie had been smart not to tell him she was pregnant. The obvious fix to the problem was what he and Carol had done several times: get rid of it. Now it was too late and the mess was out in the open.

And to top it all off, he was disappointed. He had always hoped that maybe his daughter would be more like him. He knew she had her own Mask, just like he did. He knew that she could be ruthless and calculating and use it to good effect to get things done when they needed doing. But she had only ever used it when she had to, like when she talked her way out of a school suspension for cheating on her history final in high school. She had pinned it on someone else in a perfectly plausible way. He had been proud of that.

But no, she didn't use those skills very often at all. It made all the effort to raise her feel like a waste of time. Hell, he hated kids. Couldn't stand all their mewling and drooling and demanding. It was too transparent for him. But nobody trusted a single politician, and everybody trusted a family man. So he married Carol shortly after law school. She was pleasant enough to look at and she went along with the program. She smiled genuinely at everyone else and still tolerated John, which was just about what

he could deal with anyway. They had Annie early, and he left the rest of the work to Carol. Annie got more interesting as she got older - when he started seeing that she had a Mask too - but then she never really used it. Disappointing. Now he had to clean up.

He pulled up next to Robert's cart on the path next to the 9th hole tee box, got out and pulled his golf bag over onto his cart. The first thing to deal with was Robert.

"You know about any of this?" he said in his carrying voice, the one the Mask used with authority. He looked Robert in the eye. Robert was slightly shorter and slightly more handsome. He always seemed willing to stand nearby while John speechified, providing a wholesome face for TV audiences. But alone, out on the golf courses for instance, they were of the same mold.

Robert looked right back, unwavering. "David called me after you left. The timing seemed coordinated. It's his doing. What a dumb fuck. He's been pulling this kind of shit since high school, you know."

John smiled. Good, they could scheme on this together. But carefully.

"What a morning, Jesus," he said. "A baby out of wedlock and an upcoming marriage. You think it'll work?"

"No, and that's another big problem. They're young and dumb. It'll be a divorce within a couple of years and we'll have to deal with that too. The only thing that's worse in the polls than a baby out of wedlock is a divorce. We'll lose the Baptists or the Non-Denominationalists completely. Maybe both. Doesn't matter after the primaries maybe, but that's still a lot to get through."

John nodded, thinking it over. He grabbed a three wood from his bag and stretched, holding the club aloft. Then he strode up to the tee box and took a couple of practice swings, felt the weight of the club arc around him, settled into the curve. He was in the mood to attack, so he placed the ball dead on the grass, stepped up

and looked once down the fairway. Then he pulled it down the left side hard, slicing the ball so that it struggled back towards the middle of the green grass. A perfect attacking shot for the uphill approach to the green.

"It'd be a damn *tragedy*," John said, walking back to the cart. "It would undo years of angling, and we're just getting to the right places where we can really make things happen."

Robert turned suddenly on his way to the tee box. "Yes, a tragedy."

They looked at each other silently. Calculating. Tabulating. "Tragedy captures people's emotion," Robert said. He always acted as a perfect sounding board, reflecting back the parts of what John said that made sense. He did his fair share of dirty work too, but his role was mostly as second in command and advisor.

The course was silent around them. The pine trees stirred slightly in a warm breeze, and the sun was high enough in the sky now to streak through the canopy and make stripes of shadow across the grass. Everything was waiting for them to finish their train of thought.

"Just how tragic?" John whispered, slightly breathless.

Robert stared back with gray eyes, and stood as still as the pine trees. "It could be very tragic indeed."

Then Robert whirled around and walked onto the tee box, breaking the spell and the silence. He placed the ball gently on a tee, stepped up without a practice swing, and ripped the ball dead center down the fairway with his driver. The ball carried in the air the total distance of John's tee shot.

John put on the smile he used when addressing large crowds. "Mr. Lieutenant Governor, that was a great shot," John said.

"Thank you, Mr. Governor." Robert said, smiling. "I think we have just a few more details to work out and another nine holes to do it."

They each hopped in their own golf carts and started cruising up the fairway for their next shots.

Two days later, State Senator John Boswell arrived at the main lobby of the hospital at six in the evening. While this was dinnertime for those outside, in the hospital it was near the end of shift. The halls were quiet before the daytime employees started their exodus home. John was dressed in his standard attire when not on the golf course, a black pinstriped suit with a small Florida state flag pin, white shirt, and red tie. He carried a small polished black briefcase with bright gold fittings and handle. It was something he had become known for, to the point that people expected to see the briefcase if they saw John Boswell. He knew that carrying it was an old-fashioned affectation, the kind of thing that state legislators would have done decades ago. But it also gave an aura of prestige and professionalism, and it was actually useful for all the things he often carried with him.

John walked up to the same visitor's desk he had visited two days before, this time giving the attendant there his campaign smile, the Mask in full effect. He needed to be seen and to be important today. The older woman saw him coming and smiled, her wrinkles pulling back to show a glimpse of the beauty she had fifty years ago.

"Good evening Miss. John Boswell here to visit Annie Boswell, in the maternity ward," he said.

"Yes sir," she said, as she looked up the patient's name. She clicked a few more times and the printer behind her started moving.

"Just a moment," she said, still smiling and fluttering at John. "I have to say, I really enjoyed hearing you speak about the issues confronting the retired folks down here. I really appreciated it."

"I'm so glad—", he paused with his eyebrows raised.

"Debbie," she supplied, answering his unspoken question.

"Debbie," he repeated, still giving her the full spotlight effect of the Mask. This was great practice before visiting Annie. He always found it more difficult to use the Mask on those who had their own. "If we can't look after those who have already made it in life, already done all that was asked of them, well then who can we look after?"

"Quite right," she said, eating up his words. "Are you really planning to run for Governor this fall?"

He smiled and wagged his finger at her. "Time will tell, Debbie."

She ripped off the visitor's badge and gave it to him. "Well, you'd have my vote Mr. Boswell, the state needs upright thinkers like you. The maternity ward is in the old tower building."

John listened carefully as she gave him the directions. He already knew them from his hurried trip two days ago, and since then he had also reviewed a detailed map of the hospital online. But he listened just the same and asked her to repeat them once as if he needed to memorize them before starting off.

"Thank you kindly, Debbie. God bless you," he said, waving as he walked up the hall she had pointed him towards. He walked slowly, ambling along and looking around curiously as he walked. The newer, more grand styling near the main lobby soon gave way to the traditionally clean but boring hospital corridor style seen in every hospital in America. They were mostly empty, so he did a complete circuit of the ground floor before heading to the elevator banks. There was a camera or two in corners above main thoroughfares, but not many. And the stairwells were just where the online map had said, secured with badge readers and tucked away near service areas mostly populated by employees not visitors.

He took the elevator up to the third floor, and stepped out as the doors slid open. He smiled, looking left and right for any signs of movement. Then he turned right,

away from his daughter's room, and started walking slowly again. The air was different up here, more still and sterile. It smelled of hand sanitizer and clean linen and weakness. John hated hospitals, hated sickness, hated helplessness. It didn't matter that it wasn't his weight to bear, it was close enough to a burden to him if someone else was sick.

The automatic doors that protected the different units were open, the hospital more trusting during visiting hours while the dayshift employees were still on. John was able to make a full circuit of the floor, smiling and looking curiously around just as he had on the ground floor. Some of the employee-only areas had badge readers or locks as well as the small nursery. He stood at the nursery window for a minute, letting the Mask smile at the sleeping babies. There were only three. Hopefully it would be a slow night with less staff needed. The rest of the layout was similar to the ground floor. There were one or two cameras at key junctions, but none in the little alcove with the public bathrooms. And there were no badge readers at the stairwell doors. It was guarded from anyone trying to get in, but not as well if you were just trying to get out.

Finally, he let himself glide back down the hall to Annie's room, smiling at the nurse's station he passed along the way. He knocked again, the same way he had two days before but in a much different frame of mind.

"Annie? Annie, are you in there?"

He heard an audible intake of breath. "I'm here, Dad."

John pushed the door open with his hand. He put on his apprehensive smile, letting the Mask show the emotions that would be expected.

"I came to say hello again."

"Why?" asked Annie from her bed. She was sitting up stiffly in exactly the same place she had been two days ago, but this time there were less wires snaking across her blankets. And she was holding her baby.

"You've made some mistakes, I've made some mistakes. I was hoping to meet my grandson. I didn't get to the other day."

"You want to meet my beautiful mistake? Here he is." She held him up a bit so he could see. Robert was sleeping peacefully.

John walked over, letting the Mask smile for him.

"Drop it, Dad. There's no cameras here," said Annie.

John stopped and the Mask cracked open again, despite all his promises to himself. She saw through it quickly. He thought back to the last time he was here, and the first time he had ever cracked in front of someone else. There apparently wasn't enough glue to hold that together. Fine. He put his briefcase down. There were other faces he could use. She knew he put out a front to the world but she still didn't know what was underneath, even though she was his daughter. So he let her see what he wanted her to see, and looked curiously at Robert.

"He doesn't do much does he?" he said.

"No he doesn't." Annie said. She relaxed her shoulders a little. "He just sleeps mostly."

"Could I hold him?"

"Not yet, I think. I'm still dealing with this. Give it some time."

John let himself be frustrated and recover. "Fair enough. Like I said, I've made some mistakes."

Annie pressed a button next to her bed.

"I'll be leaving the hospital tomorrow morning," Annie said as she slowly rocked her baby. "Robert seems to be doing well enough to go home now, and I've recovered enough too. David lives in a nice apartment above his parent's garage. We're moving in there. We've already got a crib and everything. Maybe give it a couple more days, then visit us there. David will be there too."

John frowned, but nodded. "Fair enough. I—"

The nurse walked in and John immediately smiled at her. She smiled back and looked at Annie. "Yes Miss Boswell?" she said.

"I'm done feeding him. Could you lay him back down for me? Then I'm going to try to take a shower in a bit."

"Of course," the nurse said, coming around the bed and smiling at the little bundle of blankets. "He looks peaceful. It's almost the end of my shift now. I'll let the night nurse know you're taking a shower and have her come in afterwards to check on you. Good luck going home tomorrow."

"Thank you again for everything," Annie said.

The nurse smiled at Annie and John and the little baby, all three generations at once, and left the room.

John looked at his watch and nodded.

"I'll call in a couple of days then, and see about coming over."

"Thanks Dad," Annie said.

"We'll sort this all out. Until then, get some more rest."

"Bye Dad."

He picked up his briefcase and eased the big quiet door closed as he left, leaving it just cracked so that the door kissed the frame. Then he turned left, walking quickly down the hall. Away from the elevators.

The next morning at eight, John received a phone call. He walked outside to take it. He was both tired and busy - it had been an interesting night - so he didn't pick up until the fourth ring.

"Hello Annie," he said.

A long low moan broken by sobs was the only reply.

"Annie? Annie, are you ok?" he said.

"My ba- baby. He's, he's deeeeeeeaaaaad," she wailed. She could barely talk.

"How? What happened?" He asked, very concerned. He held his breath. He had to wait another minute for a response. Annie was losing it.

"Th- they said it was SIDS- he, he j-just stopp-ped breathing. Oh God, oh God."

John breathed out. "Annie, I'm so, so sorry. I'll grab your mother and we'll be there right away."

"You-" she started. But he hung up and walked back inside the garage.

"Sorry about the interruption David," he said. "That was an important phone call. It was Annie."

David looked down from the stool he was standing on. His hands were at his sides, wrapped tightly against his body with a large belt. His sandy blonde hair was a mess, and his cheeks were stained with tears. A handkerchief was tied tight in his mouth. The noose hung loosely around his neck.

"You see, I lied earlier. I know, I know. Wrong of me. I said I would kill Annie and your baby if you didn't do what I said. After all the work I've put in, do you really think I could kill my daughter? And she's still got potential, she just needs to be hardened up. But a tiny little thing like that baby? Brand new? He never should have been born in the first place. And out of wedlock! Think how that would make your father and I look, David. We'd be hypocrites, proselytizing and forcing others to live good lives while unable to control our own families. No, we couldn't have that, could we? So last night, I killed that drunken little mistake of yours. Smothered him with a blanket."

David moaned and thrashed against his restraints.

John chuckled. "I know. I'm sorry. Do you forgive me for lying? How else was I to get you up on that stool? A suicide would be so much cleaner than using this," and he

held up a butcher knife, "though perhaps not as fun. I wouldn't know. I haven't tried this before."

David stopped thrashing again at the sight of the knife. John let his Mask smile the spotlight smile and leaned against the garage workbench. "It's amazing what the combination of a politician's lies and a big knife will convince someone to do. Thank you for helping reaffirm that truth for me. I've learned a lot about myself tonight. I learned that I was good at something else. I didn't just kill your baby, I enjoyed it too."

"It wasn't that hard really. The planning or the killing. I got there near the end of shift and scoped out a route to make sure there weren't many cameras around. I went up and visited with them a bit. My prints and hairs and whatever else they'd look for are all over the place. Even if they did think something was wrong - and now I know they don't - who would suspect a state senator for Chrissakes?"

"But still, I did it cautiously. Did it so they'd just think he stopped breathing. Annie said she needed a shower and the brat was asleep. So I hid in another bathroom until the next shift started. New people. I changed in the bathroom too. Civilian clothes instead of my classic suit. That got folded up and went in a backpack along with my briefcase. Just a nice little swap. And I added a hat in case my route out past the cameras wasn't perfect. But it was perfect."

John dropped his voice and walked right up to where David was perched on the stool, still wide-eyed and breathing hard. He looked up into David's frantic eyes and dropped his voice low. "The rest was easy. A blanket over the face and press down gently. No sign of force. I just waited until he stopped breathing so it looked natural."

"I tried to keep myself blank. Tried to be mechanical, to treat it as something I just had to get through. Do you know what I mean David? I was forcing myself to feel no emotion. But I failed at that. I did feel emotion. It was slow at first, then it surged. I've felt it before, but not quite like that."

"You know what it was David? It was an adrenaline rush. It was the natural reaction to *power*. I've felt it before. I usually get it when I'm on the Senate floor and I've manipulated all the votes to come out the way I want them. I can't tell you how that feels, to have the whole state bend to your will, whether they know it or not. There's no better feeling. I'm addicted to it. I'm addicted to the rush and I'm addicted to the power. Any good politician is. They won't admit it. I mean, I'd never admit it, not unless I had a - let's say, a captive and quiet audience.

"I killed him and I've never felt anything like it. I didn't expect a rush, but I left the hospital in a daydream. I stayed up all night, in a blur. Haven't slept a wink. And you know what I realized? I realized I wanted to *do that again*."

John leaned down and put his hands gently on the tops of David's shoes. Then he looked back up again. "So David, you are a target of opportunity. You are a piece in this sad tragedy that's completely expendable. How does that feel, to be completely expendable? You are just another chance at a power rush for me. Who knows, maybe this will be my new hobby."

"So let's see, a suicide would kick the chair out to the side, don't you think? Let's try that." John pushed down and to the side on David's shoes, angling the chair to one side. David tried to resist, but then John swung his feet back the other way to kick the chair out completely. David fell tight against the noose, eyes bulging, body shaking and flopping like a fish hooked on a line and desperate to get away.

John watched and waited, still. Soon David stopped wriggling and started to hang limp, swaying in the garage. John waited a minute, smiled, and gently started undoing the belt from around his hands so they hung free. Then he gently cut the handkerchief away as well.

“Good talk, David. That was fun. And thank you. It was, in fact, just as intoxicating the second time. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go console my poor daughter.” And he turned towards the backdoor and the alley from which he had come.

Ten days later, John was on the golf course, still grieving of course. Grief was good. Grief was useful. It made great leverage. Today he was a part of a charity foursome. He didn’t know the charity and didn’t care, it was just an opportunity to push his upcoming campaign. And he was conveniently situated in a foursome with three important community leaders from Pensacola. Robert was a hole behind them with three more from Orlando.

“Of course the Democrats are going to try to use this,” the Mask said. There were nods all around. “It’s disgusting when you think about it. This sort of tragedy happens - all different sorts of tragedies - happen all the time. And the Democrats use them all for their expensive social programs and their taxes.”

They were coming up to the fifth green at Kenwood, where he had taken his daughter’s call from the hospital. The Mask kept talking to the community leaders while John reviewed all of the nonstop activity since last week. The twin tragedies, his grandson’s death and the child’s father’s - his own good friend’s son - suicide. For the whole next week the Mask had been permanently affixed. It had to be. Not only did he need to perform, to keep the proper emotions in place for all to see, he also needed the feeling of power the Mask gave him. Power was his drug of choice and he’d taken a huge double dose. The twin tragedies had left a ragged hole in him, like the blank space after an opiate addict comes down off a high. He was waiting for the next hit.

But the tragedies had left other ragged holes too. His wife was a mess. All emotion and no logic. It was annoying, but appearances were important right now. Robert’s wife was wrecked as well. Robert knew about half of the tragedy, and he may

have suspected the rest. But he had never much cared for his son; that had been his wife's job. So there had been no furtive glances. No looked questions about what happened. John wasn't sure how long that would last, but he could manage it. The Mask would let him.

Annie was unapproachable by anyone. He hadn't spoken a word to her since she called to tell him about her son. As far as he knew, she hadn't spoken to anyone. At both funerals she kept an old-fashioned black veil like a steel wall between her and the world. She had been stony through all of it. But he had seen her once, passing an open doorway at the funeral home, doubled over on the floor in front of her son's coffin, wrapped up so tight in her grief that she couldn't cry, but could only heave in great breaths of air and let them crumple back out onto the floor like so many ashes.

John could only focus on the right emotions the Mask should show and the deep new source of power he'd become obsessed with. He wanted the next hit. He knew he'd have to wait awhile, but he had no doubt he wanted to kill again. It wasn't fun; not exactly, there was too much stress in it for that. Politics was the same way, too much stress to be fun. But the power made up for it. The power made it real. The power was consuming and made it the only thing that mattered.

One of their foursome was conveniently a scratch golfer, mostly included for just this purpose, and his ball was nestled tight between the green and the rough around a bunker. The rest of them spread out around the edges of the green, each taking turns bumping the ball closer. John used the small moment of separation to consider a next victim. Maybe one of these three. Maybe the scratch golfer. It always bothered him when people took golf too seriously. It wasn't much of a reason, but he didn't need it. He rolled his tongue around his mouth while considering, as if tasting the idea. It felt good. He hadn't been to Pensacola in awhile.

John bumped his ball closer to the pin, then walked forward where everyone was now congregated at the hole.

"What the hell?" the scratch golfer said, pointing up the fairway. A loan golf cart was rolling towards them down the middle of the fairway.

"Why aren't they waiting," another said. "It isn't like we don't have someone in front of us too." As the cart got closer, they could see it was one of the motorized gardening carts used by the staff. A shock of yellow hair was flying behind the driver. It had been borrowed.

Annie drove right onto the green and got out immediately. As she walked towards them, she put the ammo clip in the Glock she had purchased yesterday and raised it at the foursome. They stared back at her, mouths open.

"You three, leave now."

The scratch golfer, perhaps more naive than the rest, started to step forward and say something.

Annie focused her eyes and gun on him directly and he hesitated. They all raised their hands.

"NOW!" she screamed, and her voice ripped the silence of the curated landscape around them. The three community leaders dropped their clubs and ran to their cart, driving off towards the next tee box. They got out their phones quickly and started making calls.

"Hello Dad," Annie said. She pointed the gun at his chest. She released the safety. Her eyes remained calm.

"What the hell Annie?" John said.

"No, you don't get to ask questions. You answer." She paused, seeing if he would interrupt. He didn't.

"All your focus for the last couple years has been about getting on the national stage. Am I right?"

He nodded.

"Governor. Then maybe Senate. Or just skip the Senate and go straight to a White House bid."

He nodded again.

"What happened to my son?"

John didn't say anything.

"You killed him."

John felt surprised, but he didn't say anything. He just sat there, calculating furiously.

"And David?"

John said nothing.

"You sounded different on the phone when I called to tell you my son died." Annie started gesticulating with the gun and her eyes were glossy. "I heard your reaction, but I didn't think about it for a couple of days. I figured it out in the funeral home. I was sitting with him. He was nestled in his coffin just like he was nestled in his crib in the hospital. I think he helped me figure it out. I lost it then."

John's careful planning had all worked, but he hadn't counted on this. How could he? He grasped for what words he could use, what Mask he could build to deescalate this scene.

"Annie, I know--"

"Shut up Dad," Annie said immediately. She raided the gun and her eyes were calm again. "You can't use your masks now. Did you kill my son?"

"Annie--"

"Nod or shake your head Dad."

John said nothing.

"I realized in the funeral home that your voice was all wrong when I called you. There was relief where there should have been surprise. And then I realized you were using your political voice, which never really worked with me. You were hiding something. I started wondering. I never got ahold of David that morning to tell him what happened. Just text messages.

"So I checked the time of death from the autopsy report for David. It was within five minutes of when I called you that morning. Did you kill David, Dad?"

"Annie, David was a mess. He wouldn't—"

Annie pointed the gun at the green, braced with two hands and fired once. The sound exploded in the silence of the golf course and several crows took off from the nearby pine trees. When the echo died, they could hear sirens in the distance.

"You can't talk your way out of this. I'm sure I'm right. I'm sure you killed both of them. And what did you call abortion? A recovery procedure, right? My brothers or sisters went through a recovery procedure.

"I didn't want much Dad. I never wanted your life and once I was old enough I never wanted you around either. Then the baby happened and I started to realize I could have a good life. I could enjoy a— a child, and a, a husband." Her eyes welled up again and the gun lowered slightly.

John took a step forward, started trying to talk again, both hands outstretched, using whatever power he could muster. She was only a few yards away. The sirens were closer now, but the gun went back up immediately.

"Get back!" Annie screamed. "Haven't you realized what this is yet? You ruined all of the hope I had. Ruined everything I had, your only daughter and her only son. This is my recovery procedure. This is an execution and you are powerless—"

John took a quick sidestep one way and then rushed at Annie, closing the distance between them. The sidestep worked and Annie fired where John had been standing with one hand. She took half steps backwards, both to gain more time and to recover from the recoil of the gun. Her other hand came up to steady her grip and she started firing as quickly as she could but wildly, missing on both sides of her father. Then he was right in front of her and his bulk was covering her and she kept firing as she fell backwards with John tumbling on top. Annie rolled once and John rolled over her and came to rest by her side.

She got up slowly, recovering her breath from his weight falling on top of her. Then she looked down and saw he was bleeding from two gunshot wounds. One in the lower abdomen and one in the chest. His eyes were wild and rolling, unable to focus, and his breathing came in faint bursts.

Annie shook her hands out from the shock of firing the gun. She could feel them going numb already. The sirens were much closer now. She didn't have much time. She shook her hands again and took the clip out to ensure there were at least two bullets left. There were. She reloaded.

"You killed David. You killed Robert. You killed all of my brothers and sisters. And you've killed me too. Goodbye, Dad."

She was very close, took careful aim, and shot him in the head.

Annie felt her shoulders relax as she walked away slowly. She went to the front of the green, looking out on the fairway and the rolling, brilliant shades of green that led up to the elevated tee box. She sat down there and smiled up at the blue sky. After a few seconds, she could still hear birds over the approaching sirens. The grass felt cool and lovely beneath her, and the tops of the pine trees lining the fairway were swaying peacefully in an eastern breeze.

It had still been a good life. She had a son that she loved. He had taught her a lot very quickly. Unexpectedly, she found a man she loved too. They had planned a good life together. Perhaps it could have been grand. But it was at least good.

The sirens were just on the other side of the hill behind the green now. She looked up again at the gigantic blue sky and pictured the sleeping face of her son and smiled. Then she reversed the grip on her gun and swallowed the barrel.

A pair of nearby crows nearby took off again at the sound of the shot.

Robert McNamee took a deep breath and began his performance. He strode to the podium quickly, waving to the crowd in front of him. He had changed his style significantly over the last three months. He hardly used his well known and gregarious smile. Instead, he had a bold and serious face that seemed to resonate even more in the polls. His wardrobe had changed too. His suits were always dark blue now, and he had added a blue and purple suicide awareness ribbon next to the American Flag pin on his lapel. The constant reminder of his tragedy also seemed to play well in the polls.

“Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for coming. As you know, I announced my candidacy for Governor of the state of Florida last week. I consider it an honor and a mark of respect to the legacy of John Boswell to carry on in the path that we once had planned together.” The mark of respect and legacy line had been a masterstroke by his strategist.

“Over the last week, our campaign has started to release our policy agenda. While we have many plans to make our great state even better, today I wanted to talk about something a bit more personal.”

Robert looked down, shuffled his feet, and counted to five to let the silence build.

"As you all know, the late John Boswell and I shared a grandson who passed away when he was only a few days old. In a spiral of emotion and mental instability, this unfortunate circumstance also brought about the deaths of John himself, his daughter Annie, and the suicide of my own son, David.

"If we could all share a moment of silence." Robert stepped back briefly from the podium and allowed his face to look troubled. When he stepped back to the mic, he looked out at the crowd. They were waiting for whatever he would say, and he could tell he had their sympathy.

"These tragedies, coming from my own family, have irrevocably changed my views on several issues. First, and closest to my heart is the matter of mental health and suicide. Annie and David suffered a terrible tragedy, the sudden loss of their son. Their families - me, us, those around them - and their state should have been there and done more to help them. We weren't there when they needed us. Similar situations happen all over our state every day. Mental health is overlooked in policy declarations too often.

"Today, I'm announcing a targeted funding plan to tackle mental health, addictions, and specifically suicides. A dedicated department in Health and Human Services will be setup to deal with suicide prevention, coming at the problem with all the mental health expertise the medical field can provide.

Robert paused briefly for applause before continuing. "At the same time, guns are far too easy to procure for the mentally ill. We learned this all too well with Annie and John. While the Republican Party has always and will always uphold the 2nd Amendment, we also need to take practical steps to keep guns out of the hands of those who would use them to cause tragedy. Mandatory background checks, licensing, and mental health screening must become a part of the conversation immediately.

Another, bigger round of applause. "Together, these twin policies will go far to help keep all of us on the right paths. They form the pillars of my new sweeping social agenda, which we've named 'Florida on the Straight and Narrow'. Over the coming weeks of our campaign, we plan to work with community leaders to expand this agenda and provide new and practical policies in the areas of family planning and social safety nets for those who need them."

Robert paused, spreading out his arms towards the crowd and the cameras. "All of those who are struggling with mental health deserve our care and attention. Let this be the legacy of David McNamee, John Boswell, and Annie Boswell. Let this be the path we take - along the straight and narrow together - to bring happiness and prosperity across the entire state of Florida."

The audience cheered and applauded again, they were eating this up. His political instincts told him this would play well across the entire state with Democrats and Republicans alike. Robert allowed one of his gregarious smiles from times past. The smile was genuine as he thought about how well he had capitalized on what circumstance had given him. He was now that rarest of Republicans, a compassionate man with a strong social agenda and unassailable motive. He could leverage that for years, right through a Governorship and all the way to Washington.

He smiled again as he stepped back from the podium and got ready to meet and shake hands with the crowd.