

I was usually not this jittery, but this was my ride-or-die moment. My boss, Mr. Dale, was looking through my quarterly report. I have been a project manager at GM Motors for almost two years. Unfortunately, the last two quarters have been the worst. Several factors influenced it, including the post-pandemic recession and Ford's new EV launch every two months. I live in Brampton, Ontario, and I was desperate for promotion to keep up with my demanding lifestyle. I couldn't afford to lose this job. He finally broke the silence as I stood in dreadful anticipation in front of his table.

"Hmm, David!" he said as he inspected the report. "The sales have dropped by another 10%!"

"Um, Mr. Dale, we've been working on sales, but—" Mr. Dale interjected as I spoke. "David, I admire your strategic approach, but the market is saturated with automotive industries. Everyone is running to cut each other's throats. Damn Elon, everyone wants an EV nowadays. But I don't see any investment in R&D for electric cars in this report."

"Sir, with due respect, you said not to invest in," he interrupted again, "Aaron Wesley, is that your friend who works at Ford Motors?" he asked.

"He is a childhood friend. We studied together," I muttered. "Is that so? Hmm," he whispered. "I would like you to talk to Mr. Wesley and convince him to share some inside information with us."

I was taken aback by his suggestion. "Mr. Dale, that's unethical. I won't betray my friends like that." He responded, "Mr. Ashbey, your continued existence in this company depends on it." I replied swiftly in defiance, "Then so be it."

I stomped out of his office, packed my desk, and left. Well, he left me no choice. Compromising my relationship with Aaron was a deal-breaker in any circumstances whatsoever. Aaron was my best friend. We went to the same school, graduated from the same college, and even played hockey together. I am 5'9", while he is 5'5", but he was better at playing the sport than I ever did. Aaron and I played games, picked fights, pulled pranks, laughed, and lived the best moments of our lives with each other. I've ditched three chicks because they didn't like him. I couldn't care less about Mr. Dale.

It wasn't until I pressed the keys of my car in the parking lot that shit hit the fan. "Holy shit," I whispered while sitting in the driver's seat with my hands on the steering wheel, "I just did that."

Now, I had to find another job; otherwise, I would go bankrupt. While I was spending my time in solitude, my phone rang. It was Aaron. I pressed the chiming green button. "Hey!" I called with an enthusiastic tone. "Hey, Buddy, how's it going?! You busy?" he asked.

"Yeah, no. Everything's good," I blabbered. "Okay, I called you because I wanted you to come to have dinner with Britt and me tonight at The Keg Steakhouse!" he spoke with the most lively voice I've ever heard.

I sighed. It was not the best moment for me to visit an expensive restaurant. "Bro, everything's okay, right?" he asked with slight concern. I broke the awkward tension caused due to my silence and said, "Yeah, sure! I'll be there! What's the occasion?"

"Dude, I had mentioned it earlier! It's our first anniversary since Britt, and I first met!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, how could I forget that?!" My face crumpled in embarrassment. But, alas! Life had torn apart our friendship with more severity than I could imagine! I was busy with the production schedule while he was busy with his professional and love life. Life had been unfair to me and so to him. After his parents died in an accident during our final year in college, he stoked up in his books to forget his sorrows. No wonder he became the topper of our class. But it came at a cost. Focussing on his career made him negligent towards his health. The sedentary lifestyle and booze made him overweight. He was never the same guy who could make rounds on the hockey field like a champion. "So, you are coming, right? Don't worry, I'm paying the bills!" he snapped me back from my trail of thoughts.

"Is Brett okay with this? I mean, it sounds like something you should both cherish together without any third party ruining the mood." I murmured. Brett would mind. She's just one of those girls who would watch a lot of crime dramas and be suspicious of her boyfriend trying to kill her. I don't hate her, but she can be too much sometimes. She loves to party and drink with her friends. I'm not that person who's too much into social gatherings.

"Nah, man! She's fine! It's been a while since I met you. We're all so busy in our worlds we hardly get to sit together and talk. So you have to come," Aaron asserted. I reluctantly said yes.

"That's great!" he cheered. "We'll meet at 8?"

"Yeah, alright," I said before the conversation ended.

I turned on my red Chevrolet Malibu and dashed out of the parking lot. As much as I hated the circumstances of our visit, I needed it. So I got home, took a shower, freshened myself, and wore a casual mahogany suit for the night. I put on my Rolex and lucky shoes and walked out of my apartment. The night was young. I went back to my car and headed off towards The Keg restaurant.

It took me only ten minutes to get there. It was 19:45. I parked in front of the restaurant. Rows of cars stood alongside me. The place looked like a residential house with slanted rooftops and dull walls, except that it was one of the best-rated restaurants in the entire Ontario state. I stared at the big glowing red neon lights atop the porch roof that spelled THE KEG. I stalled for fifteen minutes until I saw Aaron and Britt enter the restaurant.

I was mortified by the beckoning interaction with Aaron and Britt. I cringed at the thought of telling them I lost my job because my boss wanted to jeopardize his job and gather insider information. I wouldn't do that to him. I walked out of the car and approached the restaurant's entrance with steady steps. I pushed the door open and was greeted with

smiling faces. "Welcome, sir," a young man in a uniform said with a slight bow. I nodded with a smile and walked past him.

"Woah," the place was beautiful. The ceiling was adorned with golden lanterns and white porcelain that reflected the light emitting from the roof and the walls. The brown and yellow colors injected a soothing warmth into the atmosphere, calming my nerves. The place was filled with people, with only a few tables vacant. Then, I saw a hand waving at me. It was Aaron. "Hah! Right on time!" he exclaimed as we clasped hands together and hugged. Britt stood up and hugged me with a cordial smile.

We sat together around the round table. Aaron said, "I was just about to order the appetizers. Britt and I have decided. What's your choice, David?" I shuffled through the menu in front of me and said, "Um, Baked Bries?" He waved at a waiter and ordered it. "'So, David, it's been a while," Britt said, "'we've been missing you, you know?"

"Yeah, me too." I chuckled and nodded. "How's life?" she asked as soon as I answered her first question. She hit the nail right on the head. "Um, it-it's great!" I fumbled, struggling to come up with a white lie. "Bro, you can let us know if something is bothering you," Aaron chimed in. "Nah, It's your day! We need to celebrate!" I said with fervor, excitement, and a bright smile. "Common guys, cheer up! It's nothing important!" I said, looking at Aaron's concerned look. He pressed his lips and smiled. "Yeah, okay."

Aaron had ordered Calamari, and Britt was having crispy fried cauliflowers. I couldn't help but notice that both were quite the foodies. Aaron and Britt had gained a couple of pounds. I kept À thoughts to myself, saving the mood. "So, Aaron, you still watch NHL?" I asked. "Bro, I would never stop loving that sport. Of course, I watch every match!" I was elated. I enthusiastically leaned forward to talk about the old times when we used to play hockey. Britt called in the waiter and ordered soup. I eagerly told her how Aaron used to have these tricks up his sleeve that he used to defeat the opposing team. Once, he maneuvered the puck alone like a champion and hit a goal! "Really?" Britt smiled at Aaron. I didn't stop singing praises of my friend until Britt interjected and asked, "Well, anything about Aaron that bothers you?"

"Um, yes, there is one thing," I said, gesturing with my index finger. Aaron curiously asked, "What? What did I do?!"

"We've been having this debate for like two years now, and he still won't budge from his proposition. He says that Nico Hischier deserves to be the captain of the New Jersey Devils and play in the NHL. But, on the other hand, I think he's overrated!" I shrugged my shoulders with a conniving smile.

"But he is! Goddamn it, I thought this discussion was over!" he guffawed.

"Oh, it was far from over! Remember, we bet a hundred dollars on him in the last match?! You owe me that money!" I laughed.

"I can't believe it! How did you win? He earned the title of captain!" Aaron said with wide, surprised eyes.

“Yeah, but have you seen his points? He hasn’t even crossed 70!” I smirked.

“So what?!” he asked.

“Bruh, I thought you knew better. 82 points. That’s what it takes to be a superstar?” I said with a sarcastic tone.

“Sure, I knew that. But that doesn’t mean Nico doesn’t have the potential. Remember when he first played and got the rookie award? If they have him as the captain, they can see something in him that we can’t. So that means I win the bet!” Aaron chuckled.

“Do you know who a real player is? Connor McDavid. He has scored 119 points! So your argument doesn’t make any sense to me! See his potential? What about results?! The New Jersey Devil is one of the NHL's bottom-ranking teams! Nico doesn’t even make a good leader!” I argued.

Britt rolled her eyes and took a sip of her soup. Aaron and I kept throwing jabs at each other while keeping our voices down as the skirmish was turning the eyes of strangers.

After a considerable time, I felt a hand tap me on the shoulder. I turned around and saw a tall, old man standing beside me. He had a crooked grin over his crumpled and scarred face.

He wore a black hat and a dark velvet coat. His hands were covered in black leather gloves, holding onto a walking stick. His pants were grey with dark stripes running down in straight lines. I got the chills as I noticed the silver skull head knob of his cane staring into my soul. “Mind if I say something?” he asked.

“Please,” I said.

“You two fight like a couple,” he muttered in his raspy voice.

“Sorry, what?” I was taken slightly aback by his statement. “I think you’ll be a good wife to him,” his voice deepened.

“What the... Agh!” I yelped out a muffled scream as the world spun in front of my eyes. Then everything went black. “Ugh... what happened... my voice,” I whispered as I opened my eyes. My hazy vision focused on the person sitting across the table. It was me! The old man was standing beside me, but his eyes were now staring toward me. Not the physical body of me that I was looking at, but me. I looked down, petrified, seeing the massive cleavage gaping back at me. Long wavy dark brown locks trickled down around my face. I picked up a few strands and was surprised at how silky they were. My hands stroked my cheeks. So soft. The purple dress is what Britt was wearing. My heart pounded in my chest.

The old man’s grin was inhumanly wide. I huffed and puffed, looking at Aaron, suspended in time. Everything was still like somebody had pressed the pause button on the universe.

I turned back to look at the stranger and screamed in a feminine voice, “What did you do to me?!” I could see the reflection of my face in his eyes. It was Britt.

The world was set back into motion. The old man was gone. I looked at Aaron talking about Nico Hischer to me, and I was responding back meaner, except it wasn't me.

I could hear a piece of soothing music playing in the background, something I hadn't noticed earlier because of the argument. I panicked, looking down at the soup sitting on the table in front of me. "Woah, stop. Britt, are you alright?!" I felt Connor's hands on top of my shoulders. I looked at him with dilated eyes, panting like a mule. "Hey, Britt! I think we need to act fast!" I saw myself running off to the counter and calling an ambulance. I saw Aaron's worried face and tried to speak, but I was so stricken with fear I could hardly make a sound. My head spun, and my vision blurred, causing me to collapse and fade to black again.

(Work in progress)