

Dark Site

by John Stauffer

"Mike, it's Jack."

"Jack, hi. How you been?"

"Well, we've had one hell of a morning."

A grim confession is marching uphill toward me. I can hear its voice and see its head bobbing up over the slope of the road.

I'm bracing for the worst as the gate to speculation opens. This is somehow implicated to his work. I can only imagine how much trouble he could unearth as the Communications Officer for a forklift wholesaler.

"We need your help, Mike."

"What's the assignment this time?" I ask.

"Decapitation."

I hear papers rustling on Jack's desk as though he's looking for his decapitation folder, buried under loss of limb with coffee stains on the cover. I take a breath and know that I may not be far off.

"Jesus, Jack." I say, leaning forward in my home office chair and press the phone to my ear as though critical air strike coordinates were about to be given. Death himself has joined this call, conferencing in from a vague world not our own.

"I know it sounds bad. I really do. This whole thing has gotten out of hand. We shipped four hundred forklifts with a faulty reinforced roll bar; the driver cage just crumbles if it tips over. Damn Chinese

suppliers fucked us, Mike. I've been up all night tracking these forklifts down. Sticks in the wind. We're 36 hours from a recall but, still, we can't be sitting on our hands on this one."

"What's the official company stance?"

This is, regrettably, where my profession enters the scene. I craft these delicate corporate confessions, whittling down these wooden calls into graceful swans of reconciliation.

My profession, unlisted in the phonebook of potential careers, requires that I peer behind the curtain and stare, dropped jawed, at what lurks behind the slick veneers of commerce. I'm shown the potential dangers and in return, I create contingency plans; draft official company responses, commit to full cooperation with law enforcement, allude to serious internal investigations underway, nod to partnerships with the Boys and Girls Club, and generally apply the formulaic calculus that telegraphs sincere regret and remorse. I plot this all out and then simply turn off the lights and walk out. Preparing a private company Web site in advance should disaster strike and heads roll. Jack's gotten a whiff of disaster and needs me to do just that.

"We want to be totally clean on this one. Not our fault. Blame game stuff, Mike. We didn't do this. Chinese supplier screwed the pooch here. But make sure we support the family. If it happens in a red state, mention the prayer services. Blue state, play up the unions."

"Okay, Jack, I'll help, I think I got the gist here."

"I appreciate you working with on this, being flexible and all. ""Sure, no problem. Send me the details. I'll work on it tonight."

Deadlines are the cement walls in the demolition derby arena of breaking news. When disaster strikes, journalists sprint neck and

neck to publish first, and my work, largely complete in advance, is sprinkled with the specifics and then it's switched it on, from dark to public, in websites and press releases and emails.

The faster this happens, the theory goes, the better odds that my client's position of regret can make it into the initial coverage while avoiding the suspicious "unavailable for comment." All of this in an attempt to rustle up a small pile of support as they reassure investors that's everything's a-okay (minus the oil spill and an army of dead seals.)

But more deeply, by confessing to me their sins I serve not only as a crisis communicator but as a Deacon presiding over the Ceremony of Capitalism, granting forgiveness and offering reconciliation. Though some days, perhaps not unlike the ordained themselves, I feel as though I'm nothing more than the ultimate hedged-bet should the offender be living out his last days on earth, holding my arm as we both feel our way through the long dark corridors of tragedy.

...

"Mike, hey it's Jack."

"Hey, Jack, how's the recall coming along?" I long to hear that they've tracked down the 400 forklifts and put a stop to their use but I also know the acres of thorny overgrowth that a global recall demands.

"It's alright, we're seeing if we can position this as a Fault of Vendor Recall, which keeps us mostly under the radar. It's doable, but it'll take a busload of lawyers to make it happen. We have to sort that out before we can announce the recall. Get our ducks lined up, you know?"

"I understand, Jack. I know these things can take time." I say, imagining Jack as seen from a helicopter, like a single elk darting through corporate swamp lands.

"That's right, they do, and it's not as easy as people would think. We can't just come out with this faulty roll bar recall, as much as we'd want to, it'd be the death knell to our product line."

"I'm sure." And I am.

"Listen, Mike, I have to run a meeting on how we notify the board about all this. I'll talk to you later when we get this all sorted out."

"Okay, Jack, I'll talk to you then."

I lean back in my chair and look out at the frost inching its way up my sliding glass door and on the bare trees in my yard. I can smell the strategic denial cooking as it simmers in the board room meetings, spooned to me for a taste over the phone with Jack.

By itself, a dark site confronts a yawning horror in one long-legged hurdle, leaping over and back down in stride, eyes fixed on the horizon. Though, viewed from a few steps back, these molecular incidents -- the recalls, the unforeseen accidents, sour quarterly earnings, profit-salvaging layoffs, downward sales, plant closings, train derailments, tainted spinach, fecal traces, failed inspections, hostile takeovers, short selling, price fixing, buy outs — all of this blurs into one glorious blood soaked mosaic, giving way to the face of corporate deception.

Forensic detectives from future galaxies sent here to study our planet and understand its inhabitants, our hopes and fears, need to simply riffle through a collection of Dark Sites created at the request of extinct earthly titans. Reading over these hidden pages, foreign historians could pinpoint the breakthroughs in advanced medicine,

what was in our food, how we lived, what kept us up at night, or what we swallowed to get us to sleep

...

"Mike, listen, it's Jack. I don't have much time here."

Their product, an industrial forklift, has killed someone, of this I am certain.

"We're looking at one dead in Sacramento. The guy, he just flipped the thing over and it crushed him. Jesus, those fucking lifts should have never gone out. David H-A-I-N-E-S is his name. Rented the forklift for a light duty commercial work. Two kids, wife heads up the PTA out there..."

I let him carry on like this for a few moments, allowing Jack to jog past the death and go through the motions of his job. Reporting out the facts, talking to me, flipping through papers.

"...I got all three local news desks and the AP seeking comment, Mike. One of them wants our recall logs...."

Like a priest on the battle field, I'm called to service as I listen to Jack and the fall out from the death of David Haines. Each day, I'm waved over by men like Jack crouched over the body of a dying soldier. And each day I make my way to the scene and put my ear to the face of the wounded. Forgive me father for We have sinned...Mike, listen, it's bad... And each day a confession tumbles out on the limp sails of short breath and a slim chance at redemption is born, as dirt and dust and blood and ink rain down upon us all. If there ever was a corporate version of that man knelt on the field of battle, I am him.

