

Things You Can Do, Some Can't Be Done

by Joseph M. Owens

Back at the condo, it's been maybe 15 minutes and I'm still futzing around with my tie. The deep breathing has helped. My heart rate is back down to a normal resting rate somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 to 60 beats per minute, about one solid thump every second like clockwork, a precision I can truly appreciate.

Ashley's slender figure materializes at my side and, as always, I'm always struck by how much better she makes me look. She stands on her tiptoes and playfully bites my earlobe, her gaze never leaving our mirrored reflection.

"I've got a surprise for you," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, in the living room. Come see." She takes my hand and begins pulling me away from the mirror, I resist for a split-second just to take myself in one last time, confirming the symmetry of my shirt, tie, dress pants—the whole ensemble. I'm five-by-five, good to go.

A smallish amassment of white powder, parsed into evenly-spaced rows, sits atop our *Nuevo Roma* coffee table's black marble surface, the sight of which, perhaps even just a week or so ago, would have produced a slavering Pavlovian-like effect over me, but tonight, it only makes my stomach drop and almost triples my heart rate, which Ashley immediately recognizes.

"Jesus, babe, you look like a ghost. Everything okay?"

Ashley says.

Perspiration bursts from the pores above my brows and the only thing I can say is, "Yeah, no, *I'm good*," and then, "I think I just need to sit down—got lightheaded all of a sudden." Which wasn't true, but it was the first thing that came to mind that seemed

believable that I could tell her. The look she gave me intimated she knew I wasn't telling her the truth, not the whole truth anyway.

"You want some water? You haven't been this pale since, like, *February*," she says, poking a little fun at the difficulty I seem to have in maintaining any kind of darker pigmentary coloration in the winter.

I nod in acquiescence and lean back into the sofa, stare at the ceiling. I swallow two 5mg tablets of Dexedrine with my spit because I think at least half of my feeling weird is from coming down from my last two Dexedrine a few hours ago. I close my eyes and think about the other half, the meeting I had with Mr. Bartleby Monday afternoon I haven't told her about yet.

Everyone at the firm was wrapping up what they were working on for the day. The clock read 4:47, and even at prestigious investment banking firms like *B.B.B. & Co.*, the last ten minutes, give or take, of each workday are ostensibly a wash—the last 15 minutes on Fridays. I'd just opened up my fantasy football homepage and was in the middle of trying to figure out who I'd be starting this Sunday and who'd be sitting the bench.[1] I'd just logged-in to my *Yahoo! Sports* account when I received an alert of an incoming *Push-To-Talk* message.

"Deramore?" Albus J. Bartleby said, using his latest Motorola Droid's *Push-To-Talk* feature as a direct intercom line.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Bartleby?" I said, responding into my iPhone, unsure of what he could possibly want right now, but also a little nervous that maybe I really did know.

"I'm gonna go ahead and need a—*God willing*—brief face-to-face with you in my office before five o'clock. Which basically means right now since my overall desire to stay here at the office after five is, frankly, pretty damn low."

"Can do, sir," I said, still unable to judge the tone of his voice.

"*Shit on fire*, son—that's what I like to hear! That's a winning *can-do* attitude right there, Deramore, I tell you what."

"I'll be up in less than two minutes, Mr. Bartleby."

A minute-and-a-half later, I saw Albus J. Bartleby minimize the window on his PC containing his minesweeper game—which he was, in fact, just simply putting the screws to, to put it mildly—right as I gave a quick courtesy knock and, subsequently, walked through the CEO's open office door.

“Have a seat, son.”

“Thank you Mr. Bartleby.”

“Listen—Sawyer, is it?”

“Yes, sir—Sawyer Deramore,” I said. “That's me.”

“Right. Victor's son. Sawyer, as you are, I'm sure, aware, we drug test randomly here at *Bartleby and Co.*,” Albus J. Bartleby said, looking over the top of his trifocals at a smallish stack of documents that I concluded must be important, as well as the reason I was at that moment sitting in the Chief Executive Officer's office.

“Yes. That is to say, *yes*, I am aware,” I said, “—of the policy,” I added, shifting my weight in the ridiculously plush office chair, that, upon closer inspection, placed my seated height at a multiple-inch disadvantage to that of Mr. Bartleby's, clearly by design.

“And judging by these Internal Negotiations and Acquisitions Net Exchange reports, you are one *helluva* broker and a real asset to us,” A. J. Bartleby said without looking up.

“Thank you Mr. Bartleby, sir.”

“Which is why I have to wonder out loud—if you'll permit me to speak plainly—just what in the *fuck* are you doing with *co-caine* all mixed up in your piss test?” His gaze over his bifocals was then fully locked on to me.

“I— I'm sorry, sir. It was a complete error in judgment on my part.”

“Well shit, son—you're goddamn right it was! It's not like we don't give our employees who do the kind of heavy profit making you do ample fucken warning before we make 'em piss in a cup!”

“I know, sir. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been just *epically* stressing out about that particular urine test. It was really just a

giant error in judgment. One too many scotch and waters[2] and a little too much cheer with some friends is all."

"Mind if I ask who you were *cheering* it up with when this so-called error in judgment occurred? Might be a case where we can just throw someone else under the bus—say they slipped it to you, say they got you all in a whole heaping *fuckload of shit* at work—that sort of thing."

"Sir, if I could be really honest, I'd really prefer not to drag anyone else into this since it's completely and utterly my fault. I'm willing to personally accept all the consequences of my actions." Actually, I'm not sure I fully knew exactly what I was saying.

"*Hell's bells*, son—I'd really goddamn-well prefer not to be in possession of this information *at all*, I mean, if we're shooting straight about 'druthers and whatnot right now."

"I apologize for putting you in such an awkward and-or unpleasant situation, Mr. Bartleby."

"Shit son, it's not my ass in the fire here—it's *yours*. Policy here at *Bartleby and Co.* dictates that something needs to be done about an employee failing a piss test, Deramore."

"I understand, sir. Should I go begin cleaning out my desk then?" I said, completely certain of my impending termination, pushing myself up using the armrests of the chair, nearly to my feet.

"Now, hold on—sit on back down—there's no reason to go making any rash decisions. Policy dictates *some* kind of disciplinary action needs to take place, but policy also leaves it up to the discretion of the employee's personal supervisor, and when it comes right down to it, I suppose I'm actually *everybody's* supervisor around here."

"I'm... not sure I follow... Sir."

"What I'm saying is, being's that my name is carved into the very slab of stone that appears in the lobby of this particular building, technically, I'm *your* supervisor, Deramore, if you are catching my fairly obvious drift. And that means I get to decide what said disciplinary action should be in the instance of this specific failed pee test here."

“Sir?”

“*Goddamn*it son! For having such an expensive East Coast education, you sure can be a thick *sonofagun*, you know that?”

“I'd just really hate to be even a little presumptuous, Mr. Bartleby.”

“You're polite too—that'll get you far, Deramore, let me tell you. But let me also go on ahead and spell out what it is I'm saying here, so's that you can pick up what I'm layin down, if you know what I mean. Myself, I will personally take care of this little drug situation where it concerns you. We aren't in the business of losing money at *Bartleby and Co.*, so I guess what I'm saying is, we aren't in the business of firing our big earners either.”

“Oh, umm—*thank you*, sir—thank you very much. I —”

“Now just hold on a minute, I'm not done yet. Of course, *something* is gonna have to go on the books that says disciplinary action was being taken, and any issues the employee in question—that's you—might have are being addressed. And I know how these things work and what the people who take a close look at the books like to see, which is that *we care* about our employees and we stick by their side to the end and all that other happy horseshit.”

“I mean, *sure. Yeah*. Whatever you think is best, Mr. Bartleby—honestly.” I really couldn't believe my luck.

“Right then, so what we have here is a case of a young man who is pretty damn good at what he does and is a real asset to the company, but who also happened to get a little reckless one night—and God knows we've *all* been a little reckless a night or two in our lives. And what those fellas who read over the books like to see are stories of fallen heroes, and such, who become the underdog and get themselves all *re*-habilitated and all that, and then they rise again like a *goddamn'd* phoenix from the *goddamn'd* ashes and such, if you're following me?”

“I think so, sir.”

“And this is *America*, son—God's own country, from sea to shining sea—and here in America, we don't just *fire* our best people:

we *re*-habilitate them—which is exactly what we are gonna do with you, Deramore.”

“.....” Rehabilitation? I honestly had nothing.

“So here's what I see happening: you're gonna sign an official written statement saying you are mighty sorry you went and *royally fucked up*, and then you're gonna apologize from the bottom of your heart for hurting your family and *co*-workers and yourself, and that you are *one-hundred-and-ten percent* committed to getting yourself all better and straightened out so that you can be the man that everyone once believed in again—that is, even if they never stopped believing in you to begin with—and so on and so forth.

“You're gonna sign that little piece of paper and go to a damn meeting once or twice a week—or whatever those sorry *sonsofbitches* who believe in all that *re*-habilitation shit do—and you're gonna have whoever is heading up those meetings sign your little sheet of paper, and you are gonna bring it back to me, because *why?*”

“Because... the guys who... read through the books... like to see the signatures...?”

“Be-cause, the *goddamn* guys who read through the *goddamn* books don't just *like* to see those signatures, son—they *love* to see those signatures! It makes them feel all warm and fuzzy inside like a shitload of corporate money isn't being flushed down the crapper right in front of their eyes. Money that could probably go toward their bonuses, by their line of thinking, I bet.”

“I understand, sir, yes—absolutely.” I think I thought I understood, anyway.

“And so you're going to go to these meetings, and we're also going to have to—just for the sake of record keeping here, you understand?—give you a *de*-motion, of sorts.”

“Sir?” This, for sure, was a contingency I had not expected.

“Don't worry, Deramore—the pay's gonna be the same, so you can go ahead and keep on living whatever kind of lifestyle it is you've gotten yourself accustomed to living since working here at *Bartleby and Co*. We just gotta keep our shit smelling like roses on

paper, if you catch my metaphor? So in the mean time, you are—as of this coming Monday—gonna be heading up things over in mutual funds. It's not quite as sexy as acquisitions, but I've been in this business long enough to know that not a whole lot else is."

"So then the projects I'm currently working on?"

"On paper—" Bartleby leaned in and looked at me over the top of his spectacles, "—as I'd like to keep re-iterating—they are going on over to Frank C. Pelizotti. Of course, you'll still be the brains behind all those deals. The unfortunate part of it is that there's just no way we can pay you the commission from them, from a strictly records-keeping point of view. No real point in arguing about it either since I'm sure you can appreciate our hands being tied."

"....." Again, I had nothing.

"And the last thing I wanted to mention, while I've got you sitting here, is that we've got some good ol' boys coming from the Securities and Exchange Commission in about two weeks—give or take a couple days—so in all likelihood, that means it'll be even sooner. The SEC never tells us when they're dropping by, but that's why, in this business, it's good to *know people*—as they say—so you can at least get a rough idea when to expect a major audit before they're here, all of a sudden, standing on our welcome mat with briefcases and calculators, and being all demanding about seeing our bookkeeping records and whatever else."

"...O-K...?"

"So basically, we're gonna need you to work closely with Frank on getting everything *five-by-five* before those SEC boys show up. God love Frank, but he's at least one foil pack short of a box of Pop Tarts sometimes, if you catch my drift. And—this is only me speculating at this point—but if his uncle's name wasn't carved into the very same entranceway stone-slab-*thingamajig* I just mentioned a couple minutes ago, I'd be highly doubtful we'd even be retaining his services at all—but again, that's just my two cents that don't bear any real significance worth repeating outside this office, if you get me?"

Albus J. Bartleby and I sat facing each another for a few moments which then became somewhat awkward when neither of us proceeded to say anything to break the silence (that is, within a contemporarily accepted and socially-appropriate amount of time).

“OK... well then, I should probably be going,” I finally said, standing up from my chair, Bartleby immediately following suit and extending a hand to me.

“You're a helluva team player, Deramore—a *helluva* team player—and a good sport to boot! I'm glad we had this talk. I'll have H-R get you that information concerning your weekly meetings and whatnot straight away so's that you can begin the process of *re*-habilitating yourself, *A-S-A-P!*”

“...Thank you, Mr. Bartleby, sir.” I couldn't think of what else to say at the time.

“Don't even waste another second of yours thanking me. You just have yourself a great night—and a great weekend, too!”

“I will—I appreciate it, sir. Thank you, again.”

I've been spacing out. Ashley's voice brings me back to our living room. *Earth to Sawyer?* I rub my eyes because I can't think of anything else to do and tell her I was spacing out, but I don't mention what it was I was thinking about. Revealing the conversation with Mr. Bartleby will have to happen later.

[1] Bengals receiver Chad Ochocinco was fined this week for sending a Tweet on a his iPhone from the end zone after scoring a touchdown which cost him \$25,000 and a quarter of playing time so he'd be sitting, for sure.

[2] Technically they were Jack and Cokes, but Scotch and waters sound infinitely more distinguished and at this point, I was also pretty sure the word Coke in any form at all should be kept to a bare minimum.

