

Teach a Man to Fish

I stood between the lanes, squinting at the faces above the steering wheels of the approaching cars: male faces and female faces, young, old, attractive, funny-looking, with or without various hats, sunglasses, eyeglasses, earrings, beards. I was a nuisance, the faces said. My presence here bespoke a failure in law enforcement. They kept on coming, saying no, no, no, no, no, no. At last I saw a man who would permit me to clean his windshield, and a second later I recognized him as particular human being I used to know, Greg Waring from Caribiner Inc. The name was right there.

It was bound to happen one day, now it had, oh boy. I felt it on my skin. It was worse than I'd ever thought it would be. It didn't occur to me to turn around or hurry to the next car. I just did what I do. He hadn't placed me yet. Maybe he wouldn't. It had been 17 years, and certainly I'd changed more than he had.

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We were inches from each other. I saw the knowledge expand across Greg's face like a drop of blood in a glass of water. His lips moved. After a short delay I read them. The words he had spoken were: *Oh my God*.

"Todd?" he said, loud enough for me to hear it through the glass. With a squeek so high it was almost a click a downward swipe of the squeegee improved visibility to a point that erased all doubt. I shook excess water onto the pavement and walked around to the driver's side. The window went down.

"Todd?" he asked again.

"Greg."

"Todd Gurney? From Caribiner?"

"Yeah. Him. I mean God yes, me."

"Todd Gurney. I can't believe it."

Then nothing. We had already run out of conversation, but we still amazed each other. Cars off the George Washington Bridge were piling up behind us. Horns were honking. He opened the door on the passenger side, I got in, he pulled the car over to Broadway under the bus station.

It was 96-degrees, bad for business. People who would otherwise have stopped had passed me because they didn't want to open their windows. To be suddenly inside one of the cars, a world of inexhaustible comfort, was all by itself a sharp reversal of fortune like something in an Arabian Nights story, I thought. I have such thoughts.

We were at the bus station entrance, in shade, the parking lot over our heads, surrounded by automotive noises, pedestrians, taxis, massy steel girders and concrete pillars. He noticed a skinny woman with a short skirt

and too-prominent tendons in her neck and legs. She noticed him right back and walked towards us. "Going out?"

Then it was our turn, this poor woman and I, to recognize each other, as strangers who made our living within the same square inch of the city map. Then came a puzzled expression: what was I doing in the car? Could I be stealing business from her? Did I do that, too? Did I, too, do that? She tilted her head, as though she had learned something unimportant, and moved on. "Wow," I said. I decided not to explain it to Greg.

"Okay. Hey, we should go somewhere, talk, right?" When he wasn't talking his lips were millimeters apart. He was breathing through his mouth, but discreetly, politely, and in the same spirit he inspected me, trying to observe without doing harm, which was impossible. What did he see? I was lightweight and under-exercised, with a few patches of sunburn over a pasty, doughy complexion. My clothes had come out of a dumpster. They were my work clothes, and I had other, cleaner clothes, but he had no way of knowing that. I had a big purple bruise on my face. "Like some coffee, or..."

"Sure. Why not?"

"Why not," he said slowly, still looking. "I guess you're familiar with this area. Maybe you could recommend a place. Or, truthfully, I skipped lunch, I'm feeling kind of hungry. Maybe you know somewhere we could get a bite."

"Okay, sure," I said, and pointed, and he started driving. After a few seconds I said, "That was so tactful, Greg. I bet you had an enormous lunch." I had thought of saying it, decided no, don't say it, and then decided what the hell I'll say it.

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I directed him to a Chinese Cuban restaurant a block south of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. A restaurant, I explained, that I had discovered while I was recovering from a combination of detox and a rather unfortunate beating several years earlier. “It’s teaching hospital. Translation: three times the number of doctors working on you, just for practice,” I told him. “And they’re all qualified doctors, young, smart, even if they aren’t terribly experienced. Half of them are women. This is a hospital where by and large the doctors are prettier than the nurses. Four stars.”

He smiled to show me that he got the joke. “Maybe I’ll write a book,” I told him after another few seconds had gone by.

By this time I knew what was going to happen. I was going to talk too much.

The restaurant was an old American diner made Chinese by means of giant posters of the Hong Kong skyline and smaller posters of brightly colored sages in silk robes. Incense burned at a small shrine on the back wall. The waiter poured hot tea from the previous customers’ s pot on the table, then wiped the table clean. I pointed that out to Greg. “A thrifty, clever race. It’s funny how you can say something like that and people will call you a bigot.”

We ordered wonton soup, chicken crackling with sweet plantains, yellow rice with black beans, and *cafe con leche*. The waiter brought place mats that showed the commonest road signs; silverware; chopsticks, a medium-sized light brown plastic bowl with crispy dry noodles and a small white ceramic bowl containing a half-moon of amber duck sauce and a half-moon of hot mustard. With the tip of a noodle I put a dot of mustard in the duck sauce and a dot of duck sauce in the mustard, to stand for the tiny

drop of my kind of thing in Greg's life and the tiny drop of his kind of thing in mine.

He said, "Sorry, excuse me a minute," and made a call on his cell phone. It was a flip phone, they were new, I had seen a few people using them on the street. I looked out the big window. Two men with greasy hair, one of them with a cigarette in his mouth, were taking a bed from the back of van. An old man with his feet so swollen he wore special slippers sold at a special store was walking carefully down the street in thirsty pursuit of the dark puddle of his shadow. A happy man was walking while eating a half-stripped candy bar that was making him happy. The light changed, the cars started to move, Greg said, "I'm going to be a little late. Ran into, you'll never guess who. No. No. I'll tell you when I get home."

He was heavysset, not much more than he had been when we worked at the same company, and his hair was only a little thinner and grayer. His thick stubby fingers were in my judgment too big for the buttons on his little candybar phone. They were new. I'd seen people on the street using them. He had a lot of trouble with it, trying to end the call, hitting wrong buttons and then explaining, "I just got it. The phone."

I remembered him as a simple person, good at his work, which for me would have been unbearably dull, all statistics and regulations. I had thought about his work at the time—how could he bear to do it?—and decided that for him the abstract rules and numbers were pleasant, relaxing, like meditation, and that this accounted for his obvious ease with himself. So yes, I envied him even then. He was pure. Out with our co-workers at a bar and grill a couple blocks from the office, he would laugh politely at their dirty jokes, but his own jokes were extremely sanitary and I have to say boring; even he

didn't like them. He told them only because it was his duty, like paying for the drinks sometimes. He never said anything original. If something original occurred to him he would have been afraid to say it because he could not know in advance what effect an original remark might have on people. It might hurt somebody. It might make somebody angry. He stuck to clichés, and why not? They worked. People liked him. They didn't like me, even though I was clever and went to a tremendous amount of effort.

We sat there saying nothing for a while. He was bracing himself, getting ready for the moment when he would ask me, in what he hoped would be the least damaging way possible, "Well, Todd, what the hell happened to you?" but he wasn't articulate, he was too sensitive, he didn't know how to begin, and it occurred to me not to let him do it at all. Send him away without knowing. It would be my little revenge.

"Was that Andrea?" I asked him. "On the phone just now? You're still together?"

"Still going strong."

"Tell me about your family," I said.

He seemed grateful for the delay. Reaching strenuously into the far away back pocket of his pants he took out a wallet and flipped it open to the pictures: children and cars and swing sets on the lawn, vacations, happy days, happy life. I sighed and groaned at the painful beauty of his family. A bit of duck sauce dripped off one of the crispy noodles I was eating in the meantime and landed on the place mat near the wallet and I wiped it up hastily. Nothing must be allowed to harm his family.

"That's her? A recent picture? She looks wonderful!"

"Thanks. I'll tell her you said so."

“Take my advice, say it was somebody else. Make up a story. Don't mention me.”

“Oh no, she'd want me to. We talk about you. Some of the industrial shows you scripted, that proposal you wrote for the Kohler people, giant bathroom fixtures on the stage, you were going to call the podium a ‘commodium’...”

“What was I smoking, right?”

“No, it was funny. It was good.”

“Does she still cover her mouth when she laughs? That was such an engaging trait. I would always think she must have had bad teeth once. I used to think of it lying on top of all my worldly belongings in the 168th Street station sub-basement. In my delirium she'd be giggling behind her hand, asking me what I was doing there. What a funny place for me to pick to sleep, in a world full of cozy beds.”

“She did have braces when she was a kid. So, you were, you used to, or are you still are, you're still . . .”

“I recognize that she's not responsible for my hallucinations, just, these were the mixed-up thoughts colonizing my brain. This is a beautiful wallet. Calf-skin?”

“That's right.”

“This must have set you back. But worth it. Quality is always worth a little extra. A wise man recognizes this—as, obviously, you do. And can this be Lori?”

“As a matter of fact, that's Caroline, our other daughter. She's fifteen. *That's* Lori. She's just been accepted to—she's starting college next year.”

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“That's fantastic. What was it Whitney Houston used to say? Children are the future. She put that so well. You can't argue with that.”

“No, no, no, of course you can't. They, they, they really are.”

“Yes, I always admired Whitney's eloquence. I think you were going to tell me the name of the school.”

“Columbia.”

“That's an excellent school. She must be highly intelligent. And that body, grrrrrrrr. Reminds me of that study they did at, I believe it *was* Columbia. Gene sampling techniques used in a survey, establishing the percentage of children nationwide who weren't related to their fathers. We're not speaking of second marriages or adoptions, but of fathers who were under a misapprehension. You know what the percentage was?”

I gave him time to guess. He just stared at me.

“Eight. Eight percent.”

There was another long wait, and finally he said, “Huh. Wow.”

“It does seem high. And these were not the denizens of ghettos and trailer parks, but a representative sampling of middle-class America. Women, right?”

“I guess. Some women. Of course, some men—“

“Is there a sex we can trust?” I looked at the picture again. “If, you know, if I were her father, I mean just hypothetically, I wouldn't sleep a wink thinking about her in a co-educational institution.”

“Well, outside of convents, they all are now.”

“I'd *hurl* her into a convent. Spare me a world of worry.”

The food all came at once, soup, chicken, plantains, rice, beans, coffee. I ate like a dog. He looked down at his plate and tried to eat, wondering if any bite he might put into himself was a bite less for me.

“Todd--”

He had stopped himself. I swallowed with effort. “You were going to say?”

“Todd, I'd like to do something practical to help you, something that, if situations were reversed--I think I could get you a job. I'm guessing you could use that. It's not that there's anything wrong in what you're doing per se.”

“I'm not insulted, never fear. The squeegee is certainly not a choice for me. Not as if I woke up one day and suddenly realized, there are dirty windshields out there, so dirty, it can't go on, somebody has to do something, It's not like I've joined the windshield Peace Corps. I appreciate any help you can give me.”

“Good.”

“Teach a man to fish, don't just *give* him a fish. Give him a fishing rod.”

“Yeah. That's what I, that's why I—“

“Teach him all *about* fish. A fish rots from the head down. Teach him that kind of thing. That category of information.”

“Exactly. Now, what I have in mind. It's just, you know, its just a mailroom-type thing.”

“Please. If these were Babylonian times I'd be licking your sandals.”

He found a pen in the inside breast pocket of his suit, took his card out of his wallet, and on the back of it he wrote down the number for me to call and the name of the person to speak to.

“What happened was, you see, I was a drunk. And then I wasn't.”

“Good--because, if you want to keep the mailroom gig—“

“I like that, gig. I'll bring my axe.”

“If you want to keep the job, well you know, I don't have to say it.”

“Well, that's interesting, because, what I was about to say was that, curiously, it was when I stopped being a drunk that things started to really hurt. I had to face things then. I mean things like, uh, reality. Here I am. I am 47 years old. This is how things are. These are the limits now. The mailroom, etc. I have a little theory about this I'd like to share with you, since its so rare I meet anyone intelligent nowadays. Addictions, they simplify, not your life exactly, but certainly your value system. They keep futility at bay. They are a form of debt consolidation -- one pleasure, one need, one problem, this is what is wrong with your life, this and nothing else. You never think of how much you fear death; you think when will I get this monkey off my back? No need to think of suicide. You are already killing yourself.”

He waited to see if I was finished then said politely, “I never thought of it that way. That's really eloquent.”

“I'm eloquent and you've got the Suburu. And the grown child accepted to Columbia. And Andrea. It just shows you. I'm not sure *what* it shows you but there's sure to be some kind of fucking lesson in it, I think we can be fairly confident of that.”

“I don't know.” Greg wiped his fingers on a napkin and put up a hand to signal me to wait for him, he had something to say at last. “I guess I don't

necessarily think of myself as that successful. I mean I'm paying the bills all right, but I compare myself with what I'd planned to do, I compare myself with where other people I know, people my age, are, and I....” He trailed off. He gave up. He wanted to be philosophical and reflective, it had struck him that this what our meeting might turn out to be about: taking stock. But he became bored with himself after a couple of sentences.

“Character,” I said. “That's what someone like you has. Character always wins over brains. My character flaw is a complete lack of tact. I don't say I'm any better than the average person. Undeniably I do mean things and stupid things. However, so do most people but they don't have my mouth, fortunately for them. I'm right, aren't I? You'll give me that much.”

He withheld his opinion.

“What's it like there now?” I asked him. “Caribiner.”

“Well, you see, I moved on about five years ago. I'm in marketing now. For Showcase, in New Jersey. I'm still in touch with a couple of people—Curtis, you remember Curtis?”

“Good old Curtis. What about His Majesty Charles Burgess?”

“He sold the shop. They kept him on as president and general manager another four, five years. Then, I had moved on, I heard he retired. He'd be in his seventies now. That's all I know.”

“You know what happened between me and him?”

“Well, there were rumors.”

“Were there? Interesting. Well, he fired me over Andrea. We were, I might as well tell you, we were having, what a stupid phrase, we were 'having an affair.' See, it began before you two were married, and it stopped, but then

it started again, and this sanctimonious British prig, this transatlantic counter-jumper, didn't approve, so he ruined my life to save your marriage."

His reaction? A little squint, like he had a headache. A short silence. Then, as though it had nothing to do with him: "Oh. No, I didn't know that."

"Well, I could see you didn't. I didn't feel right keeping it from you. Brace yourself, there's more. Lori's mine—I'm just speaking of DNA—but for whatever significance we attach to DNA she's mine. If you ever wondered why she doesn't look like you, or if she ever said something on the order of, 'what am I *doing* in this family, you don't understand Daddy you'll never understand,' well she was right and that's why. You couldn't understand, I might have, because she was mine. I'm not saying that I think I have any claim. You raised her, paid all the bills, did all the work, I'm sure you did a wonderful job, Horton hatches the egg, no one can or would take that from you. I wouldn't, don't worry, say anything to her. Whether you should or not, that's entirely your decision. But since you were being so very kind to me, I felt it was only right that you should know."

"Okay, Todd." He put the palm of his right hand over his mouth. The hand had a big gold ring, a heraldic dragon with a diamond in its eye. His palm covered a full third of his face. His eyes, staring over his hand, were sad and unsurprised.

"Does she ever mention me? Andrea? I bet she doesn't. I wonder if she thinks about me. If, you know, when you fall asleep first, she turns, looks at you, thinks why did it happen this way, not that way, how weird ordinary things really are. Or when you're having sex, that's not impossible. Sometimes when my squeegee makes this certain noise, I'll think of her. Her angel face looking up like she was doing it for some higher cause. And that

terrible guilty depressed look afterwards, that long, long shower she'd take, the thorough way she'd scrub herself, as though she could never get clean enough, how that hurt me even then, my penis could never, never get as far into any part of her as that hurt got into me. And a few days later I'd send her a note through interoffice mail: 'To: Andrea. From: You Know Who. Re: You Know What.' ”

The hand came away from his face and he set methodically to work finishing the meal, then said, “Will you look at the time.” He looked across the room at the old woman who was standing by the cash register, and she spoke in Chinese to the waiter.

“That’s your comment? Will you look at the time? I just told you your wife was unfaithful. Your daughter isn’t yours, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, she’s *mine*. What kind of a man are you?”

Greg said, “It, look, Todd, the thing is, it didn’t happen.” He said it with a sorrowful hesitation, as though he wanted to break it to me gently. “Not with Andrea.”

“Why not? You think you know her? Nobody knows anybody that well. ”

“Well, okay, sure. If you just said that you’d, you know, been with her, one time, or a few times, okay, it could worry me. But you made it too big. To make me lose sleep, you should have said once or twice, not for a long time and not before we were married. I remember that you were bad with arithmetic. Andrea was already pregnant with Lori when we came here from Boston. She couldn’t have known you beforehand. And besides.” He stopped. I watched the skin around his cheeks hump and fall back as his tongue swept his teeth. Finally he stuck a finger inside, and then he spat something into a

napkin and folded it and wiped his lips. “Besides. Uh, look, I don’t want to...”

“What?” He didn’t answer. “What?”

”You were always talking like that. Not as mean, at first. But stories that people had good reason not to believe. It was funny at first, and we liked you for it, mostly, and even people who didn’t like it, we forgave you because we could see how talented you were, and that you, you, you know, you weren’t happy. We could see that. And then they got ugly, the stories, they took an ugly turn and it wasn’t funny anymore. We asked you to stop, you wouldn’t stop, we kept hoping you would.” His started talking in a quieter voice, because the waiter was coming. “And then you started doing it with the *customers*. Chuck didn’t want to let you go.”

When the waiter arrived Greg stopped talking. He examined the check and gave the waiter a credit card, and when the waiter was out of earshot Greg continued very gently, “Chuck offered to let you work out of your home, but you took it as an insult. Don’t you remember?”

He looked at me, and then he looked at his plate. “What happened?” he asked it. I honestly thought he was asking what happened to make me the way I am and I was going to say I didn’t know, but then he added, “My offer? The mailroom job? It made you feel small? You wanted to make me feel small too?”

“Oh, no. It wasn’t you helping. I appreciate the help.”

“So—it was what?”

“You seeing me.”

“I don’t understand that. I’m sorry. I don’t know what that means.”

“Look, Greg, Chuck lied to you. He *did* fire me because I was having an affair. It was just I was having it with Suzanne.” Suzanne was Chuck’s wife, the wife of our boss at Caribiner. “So it was easy for me to transfer all the details of my thing with Suzanne to Andrea. Just a name change. You remember Suzanne. It’s not something I’m proud of, believe me. She was a good woman. I ruined her. I ruined their marriage.”

“Oh, I see,” said Greg, “Oh. I see.”

I looked at him. He didn’t believe me, but he didn’t smile. He really was a very nice man.

As we were getting up Greg asked me where I had gotten the bruise on my face. I told him that I had been in a fight. I had spoken to someone in my usual frank way.

“It looks nasty,” he said. “You should have it looked at, if you haven’t already. Well,” he said.

The restaurant had not been very well air-conditioned, but when we were outside it I noticed the difference. Greg shook my hand and then he took out his wallet and his thumb peeled off one, two, will there be more? yes, three twenty dollar bills, all he had I think, and said, “You’ve got my card, right? I’d say wait till the bruise heals, but we’d probably better strike while the iron is hot.” and he walked back to his car, but instead of walking the other way I walked with him and he had to say goodbye again. He looked for a second as if he was worried I might expect to get in the car with him. I smiled. He smiled. He gave me a thumbs-up through the windshield. I noticed a spot I had missed. Then the windows went down. “You’ll need better clothes. Call me if that’s a problem.” The windows went up. He became his splendid car and reentered the stream of traffic.

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I walked up the street carrying my bucket, which contained rags and ammonia and the squeegee, past a bike shop and a sub shop, a store that sold musical instruments, a newsstand, a couple of restaurants, a church, a dentist's office, a place where they did amazing things to fingernails, men playing dominoes on folding tables, a three-year-old boy having the time of his life riding on a spray-painted hollow yellow mechanical horse outside a drugstore, and many other useful, precious or expendable people. A woman told her child not to look at me and gave me a dirty look—why? Don't ask me, for not seeming more prosperous, for not setting a better example. This does not happen to me every day, for your information. On another day it would have been the day's big event. It occurred to me that actually I was a very good example of the particular thing I was. I was walking by a clothing store whose merchandise had spilled out to the sidewalk, when the breeze raised by the passage of a car with a loud radio made some pages of discarded newspaper spin and flutter like a pair of wings.

I spent half of the \$60 on groceries at Key Food, and brought them back to the kitchen of the apartment on 163rd Street that I shared with a three other men my age, one of whom I suspected of stealing from me, and I had a plan to catch him at it. The smallest room iwas mine. I sat at the foot of the bed, looking out the window at the windows of the apartments across the courtyard. In general, things were getting better for me. I had a place to live, and soon I would have a job.

I was scared for a second and double-checked that I still had Greg's card. I couldn't find it, then I did, than I hunted up a Bic pen and wrote Greg's number and the number he'd said to call on a scrap of a pizza box and on the underside of a desk, and I tried not to think about it anymore. If I

thought about it I would become frightened about it not working out, Greg changing his mind because my behavior in the mailroom might reflect badly on him, or because he hadn't really meant it, or because he didn't have enough clout to make it happen, or because of the bruise, or getting it and losing it as soon as I got it through failure to control my peculiar habits of speech.

If I went on thinking like that I'd get thirsty. So I thought instead about Greg in his car now.

I pictured him on the Long Island Expressway, signaling and changing lanes, wondering about his little adventure this evening, and how much of it he should share with Andrea. He hates keeping things from her, but it would be unfair to burden her with my remarks. It would be like telling someone about a dream you had in which they did something shameful. When she presses him for details, his reputation for being bad with words will help him. "You remember Todd, what he was like." That would be enough.

He could tell her about the bruise, it occurs to him. What was it I said? I had talked to someone "in my usual frank way." Oh, he realizes, that was irony. I'd mouthed off to somebody the way I did with him. I remind him the way Lori used to behave when she didn't get a part in a school play or the score on an English composition she thought they deserved, and she'd punish themselves by going on an eating binge or saying she was going to quit school or that she didn't deserve to live. Things are bad, make them worse, until somebody is forced to admit that what is happening here isn't fair.

His life has its difficulties. At work there was an opening above him and he wasn't promoted—he's gone as far as he's going to go there, he's not sure he has the strength, at his age, for the lateral move to another company

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where he'd have a better chance of rising. Carolyn is not reading at her grade level, and a couple of times they've caught her in lies about where she's been when she goes out. Lori, the good student, the overachiever, has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and claims that she has not been happy since she was five years old. Sometimes she admits that this is an exaggeration. Andrea has had, let's say, breast cancer, lumpectomy and chemo, three years ago. She's okay now, but after that you never relax completely. These are some of his problems. He deals with them. He's glad he didn't mention them to me.

I picture him. He's at his exit. He's coming down the exit ramp. He's on Elm Boulevard and there really are elms on it. He passes the train station and Grand Union and the Dairy Queen. There's a section here where they're working on the sewer, heaps of dirt and big detached pipe sections and it's ugly, but it feels okay to be there. In fact it feels kind of good. It's where he lives. He turns onto Maple. Now he's almost home. To Andrea, to Caroline, to Lori. Fuck him.

END