

\*\*\*1977\*\*\*

“Honey, there’s someone at the door who wants to talk to Tommy.”

“Jesus Helen, it’s after dinnertime. Tell him to come back tomorrow.”

“It isn’t a kid.”

I knew right then that I was in deep shit.

\*\*\*

When my parents came to my room, there was a man wearing a tie with them. He sat down at my desk chair and looked at me, and said “Hello Tommy”. “Hello” I said. Then he introduced himself as Mr Orouke from the Providence Youth Services Division, and asked me if I had been at the Johnston rest-stop on route 95 yesterday evening. I was nervous as hell, and must have looked it.

“I doubt it,” I said. I knew that an outright denial was a bad move, but I wanted to allow for the possibility that he couldn’t prove it.

“You doubt it.” He said, looking up at my parents, and then back at me.

“He was at his friend Jimmy’s house.” My mom said, looking at me hopefully.

“Is that true Tommy?” Asked the man. I nodded. The man pulled a small notepad out of his pocket and wrote in it.

“Were you at Jimmie’s house for the *entire* evening?” He asked. I sat silent.

“Look,” said my father. “Why don’t you just cut to the chase and tell us what this is about.”

“Alright” said the man. Then he explained that yesterday evening just after 10, two boys were seen vandalizing an air compressor. “Does this sound familiar to you Tommy?” He asked.

I knew I should confess at that point, but I couldn’t think of how he could prove it, and I stayed silent. Everyone must have knew I was guilty.

“Mr Brancaccio.” Said the man, looking at my father. “Could you please tell me what you do for a living?”

“Yeah,” Said my dad. “I put coin-operated tire-filling machines at gas stations and service areas.”

“Tommy?” The man asked. “Do I need to call in to my office to have someone sent to your friend Jimmy’s house?”

“No Sir.” I said.

\*\*\*

The next day at school, I was expecting everyone to know what had happened, because there were kids with parents who worked for the police. But other than Ms Graff telling me that I looked sullen, nobody said anything. Jimmy did end up getting a visit the night before, but the videotape that showed me cutting the air compressor hose, also showed him tugging at my sleeve, trying to discourage me. I avoided him at recess.

At the end of the day, Ms Graff pulled me aside and told me to go to an office on the top floor. I don’t think she knew what had happened, but she knew I had gotten in trouble. The man last night had told me to expect all of this.

The office was tiny, and the man I met was Mr Pantolo, one of the guidance counselors. I had spoken to him once before, after a teacher caught me smashing bottles against a wall.

“Hello Tommy.”

“Hi Mr Pantolo.”

“I met with your parents about an hour ago, and everyone’s real worried about you.”

“I’m in big trouble, aren’t I?”

Mr Pantolo smiled.

“I told your mom about how when *I* was a kid, I threw rocks through the windows of an old warehouse, and that *I* turned out alright.” I smiled for the first time that day. “And I wasn’t even defending the family business... So as long as you don’t end up short and bald, you should be good.” I tried not to smile, but couldn’t help it.

“What’s gonna happen?” I asked.

“Well, I told your mom she should hug you and tell you she still loves you, so you should brace yourself for that when you get home.”

“Thanks Mr Pantolo.”

“Places that let you fill your tires for free don’t help your family business. Your dad must have complained about that.”

I sat silent. Mr Pantolo rubbed his chin.

“Don’t worry Tommy, you won’t be ratting on your father. He already mentioned to me that this is something he’s brought up in your presence... He wanted to take the heat for you.”

I nodded. My dad was stern, and I hadn’t expected that.

“You know, when *I* was a kid, all gas stations had free compressed air. Can you tell me why they don’t anymore?”

“Because people filled their tires without buying gas?”

“That’s sound reasoning Tommy. Ms Graff told me you were smart. Back in the old days, some stations didn’t have that problem because they had crews that would check your tires while you were at the pump.”

“Really?”

“That’s right. They cleaned the windshield, checked the oil, and topped off the wiper fluid too.”

“Wow. That must have been expensive.”

“Maybe. But it brought in customers, so it was worth it.... Do you have any idea why this stopped?”

“People got tired of it?”

“You’re probably right. As us students of cliché would say, ‘the novelty soon wore off’.”

I liked listening to Mr Pantolo even when I didn’t understand him.

Can you tell me why the state rest area lets you fill for free?”

I thought for a while. “Safety?”

“That’s a good guess. And everyone who pays taxes is paying for the rest stop.”

I nodded.

“Your dad also mentioned to me that there’s a company that just started selling mini air compressors that plug into your cigarette lighter.”

“Really?”

“That’s right. And there’s a new product using aerosol cans too. You know your dad is in a tough business. Do you know who else’s business is tough?”

“Firemen?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. Tough *and* dangerous... but the point I’m trying to make is that *most* people are in a tough business.”

“Not everyone.”

Mr Pantolo thought for a while.

“Well. Even if that were true, would you really want to be one of the people who had it easier than everyone else?”

I had always thought that was the whole point. You get the accounts and let the machines make the money. Now I wasn’t sure.

"I guess not."

Mr Pantolo smiled.

“Well Tommy. Your dad is in a tough business, but he has a good son to help him, and I’m guessing that if it can succeed, you two will make it happen... so good luck to you. And your mom said you’re going to have your first little-league game this weekend. So good luck with that too.”

“Thank you Mr Pantolo.”

On my way out he stopped me.

“Oh, by the way Tommy, I spoke with your friend Jimmy a little earlier, and he says he’s not angry at you for getting him in trouble... and he hopes to see you tomorrow at recess.”

I left smiling.

\*\*\*

“Jesus Helen, you want him to go to a picnic with *Danny*?”

“Why not? He’s Tommy’s uncle, and he doesn’t have any kids of his own.”

“Aw Helen, it’s just that...” I couldn’t hear what my dad said after that.

“Christ Donald! Danny is not a fruit. He’s just a loner. And he’s your *brother*! And it would mean a lot to him.”

That’s how I ended up going to the Garrett Casting Supply family picnic with my uncle Danny.

\*\*\*

Uncle Danny didn’t drive, so my dad was going to drop me off at Danny’s work so we could catch a ride to the picnic with one of his coworkers. On the way, my dad told me a confusing story about how

his little brother Danny thought he was Thomas Edison, and how he went to work wearing the same old sport-jacket and hat, but he wasn't convincing anyone, and how he still read comic books in high school. The story didn't make sense to me, but I knew what he was trying to say.

"Don't worry dad, I won't end up like Uncle Danny."

Garrett Casting Supply was in Ogdenville, which my dad called the armpit of Providence. It was in the type of big, old, brick building that people called a "Mill building". I'd been there before, but uncle Danny showed me around anyway. He showed me the warehouse out back, where the casting machines and other supplies were stored. He showed me the shop downstairs where he worked, and he took me upstairs, and showed me the door to the room that used to be his office.

"My job as 'designer' ended when the company downsized." Danny said. "But they still call me up here when they need help designing something."

We drove to the Picnic at Pontotook state park with one of the other shop workers and his wife and son, Jeremy. Uncle Danny apologized to us kids for taking up so much room, as we scrunched over to make room for him in the back seat of the car.

At the picnic, Danny stayed with me and Jeremy until someone called him away because they needed another guy for tug of war.

"Is he your dad?" Jeremy asked.

"He's my uncle."

"He smells a little."

"Sorry."

"It's ok. Do you want to go explore the rocks?"

\*\*\*1978\*\*\*

"Come on Tommy, you can watch cartoons tomorrow."

"The ones on Sunday aren't as good."

"Come on! Aren't you old for that anyway?" I turned off the TV, and went out to the van with my dad.

"Where we goin'?"

"Danvers, Mass. There's a machine out of order. Then we're going to Worcester to meet with the people from Monadnock Farms. They've got almost fifty gas stations, so if I can land that account, the business more than doubles in one shot."

After about an hour, we got off the highway.

"Is this Danvers?"

"No, its Waltham. I've got an account here that's right off the highway, and I want to see if you can do the maintenance routine on your own. Can you tell me what it is?"

"First test the machine and check for damage" I said. My dad nodded, "Then you open up the back and lubricate the compressor. Then you clean the machine. Then you clean up around the machine. Then you empty the coin-box and clean it and lubricate it." My dad smiled.

He waited in the van while I did the routine. There wasn't any damage, and the coin box was about a quarter full. I knew from experience that there was about thirty dollars there. We paid \$40 a month to

keep our machine there. I wasn't good at math, but I hoped we'd emptied the machine not too long ago. Afterwards, my Dad put \$5 of gas into the van. We went in to the office together to pay, and my dad talked to the owner for a few minutes.

When we got back in the van, my dad told me that whenever the owner was around, he always bought some gas.

"You remember all of them?" I asked. He handed me his clipboard. Next to the account name and address was "John 'Jack' Snoden/ 5'7"/ 50s/ skinny/ bald spot."

"Can you write 'Daughter in college', at the end?" My dad asked.

The problem with the machine in Danvers turned out to be something that we couldn't fix in the field, so my dad swapped it with a machine that we had in the van.

When we arrived at the Monadnock Farms headquarters, I waited in the lobby while my dad had his meeting. The lady at the desk gave me a stuffed-animal version of their logo, an apple with arms and legs. It was embarrassing that people thought I would still be into stuffed animals, and I put it on a table, intending to forget it on the way out.

Once we were on the highway I asked my dad how the meeting went.

"They said they would let me know by the end of the week. The way they said it, didn't sound good. They kept asking me what I did that they couldn't do on their own... I take care of the damn machines, so they don't have to! That's what I do. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Uncle Danny is an inventor." I said.

"Jesus Tommy. Danny *thinks* he's an inventor."

"He got a patent."

"He got a patent that was overturned. It was the same as something NASA patented *thirty years ago*."

"I said that to Mr Pantolo, and he said that just means that Danny thinks the same as a rocket scientist."

"Mr Pantolo, eh?"

\*\*\*

"Watch it Jackass!" Shouted a man in a pickup.

"Jesus Danny, watch where you're going." Said my dad.

Danny pulled to the side and turned off the car.

"Why do I gotta learn to drive anyway?"

"If you want to help with the business, you gotta drive. Tommy can't drive for almost another 3 years."

"Can't I just work on machines back in the garage?"

"It costs more money that way. I gotta fix stuff in the field whenever I can. I only got room for one machine in the van."

"Why not make extra trips?"

"That costs money. The van gets 10 miles a gallon. Christ Danny, I spend half my life driving around, and my wife is bagging groceries, and you want me to drive even more?"

“I thought Helen was a produce manager.”

“All I know is the last time I was in there, she was bagging groceries... Look Danny, if you want to help the business, you gotta *know* the business. Didn't you say that yourself?”

“Did I?”

“Yeah. You said you were able to make an invention that improved the casting machines because you work with them every day.”

“Oh yeah... I guess I did.” Danny restarted the car.

“Tommy.” My dad said, turning around to look to me. “You should put on your seat-belt.”

\*\*\*

“Jesus Helen. The man is hopeless! How long do you think I should keep doing this?”

“A lot of people fail on their first try.”

“He's 34 years old and he can barely look out for himself. You want our son riding around in a van with him?”

“He's a more cautious driver than you are.”

“Cautious! He drives 45 on the highway! You want a van with my name on it driving around pissing people off? He's just going to cost me money, and things are tough enough as it is.”

“He won't cost you money. He'll contribute! He's not even working for you yet, and he's already had a good idea for the business.”

“Good Idea? He wants to make the machines accept tokens like at the arcade? How the hell does a grown man know so much about the arcade anyway?”

When Uncle Danny showed up to go to his driver's test on the previous day, he had presented the idea that our machines should accept tokens, as well as coins, so that gas station owners could allow paying customers to get a discount on filling their tires. The fact that customers might be upset about having to pay for air was the biggest reason for people not taking one of our machines, and the tokens sounded like a good idea to me.

“I think it's a good idea.” Said my mom.

“My coin boxes are already full of Drachmas!” My Dad was talking about a type of Greek coin that was the same size as a quarter. “Making the machines accept more coin-sizes is just gonna make the problem worse. Where the hell are so many people getting Drachmas anyway?”

“It shows creative thinking.”

“Jesus! People are ripping me off, and you're *complimenting* them?”

“I mean that your brother's idea shows creative thinking even if it doesn't work out.”

“Oh... I don't know Helen. *Nothing* ever works out for Danny. You know he buys sour cream in a four pound tub? Where does he even get it that size? *Your* store doesn't have it.”

“Alright Donald. If Danny fails on the second try, I won't keep bugging you.”

“Alright Helen. I've got to go down to New Haven tomorrow. Danny can come along and get some more practice.”

I turned off my light, and went to sleep feeling glad he would get another chance.

\*\*\*

Uncle Danny passed on his second try, but he wouldn't drive the van alone with me at first. My dad would have allowed it, but Danny didn't want to risk my safety. My dad was pissed off that all three of us had to drive around, and complained to my mom that Danny was just making things tougher. My mom kept appealing to my dad's sense of brotherly duty.

We didn't get the Monadnock Farms account, but my dad said it was okay. Many of his accounts were people who decided to do things on their own, but then came back to my dad when they found out how much hassle it was to take care of the machines.

That Saturday, we had a meeting with a prospective client who ran an independent station in Brockton. On the drive to the station, my dad told me that the owner was from Egypt, so I should make sure he couldn't see the cross I had around my neck.

"And Danny..." he said. "Please don't do anything embarrassing like buying two packs of cupcakes."

"Come on Donny. I just did that because there's not much to choose from in these gas stations."

"Why didn't you bring some of those pears that Helen brought you?"

"I already ate them is how come."

"Jesus Danny."

Danny said he would stay in the van while we went in to meet with the station owner.

When we got inside, my dad gave the owner his usual talk about how freeloaders get in the way of paying customers, and that a lot of the time, when people see a gas station is too crowded, they just drive on to the next one.

"What do you say Mr Faruq? It's one less thing to worry about, and it eases congestion, and it's an easy forty bucks."

"I don't know Mr Brancaccio. I have customers tell me they like that I have free air. Congestion is not so bad. I want my customers happy."

My Dad knew he was losing another one.

"Tell me Mr Faruq. What if we had a machine that also took tokens that you could give for free to your paying customers?"

Mr Faruq thought for a while.

"Free tokens... That's a good Idea. If you have it, I try it out."

"Oh yeah? It was my brother's idea." My dad pointed out to the van where Danny was waiting. "He's an inventor. He's been awarded a US patent."

"He's a smart man. I look forward to hearing from you." My dad shook hands with the owner.

"Thank you Mr Faruq. I'll call you when I have news. And I'll take \$10 of regular... and these too." My dad grabbed two packs of apple pie pastries and put them on the counter.

\*\*\*