

Joe B.

The buildings were tall. Not quite Manhattan, scrape-the-sky tall, but tall for Brooklyn. They cut the sun's rays, drawing sharp shadows along the streets that ran in from the East River. Standing on the corner of Washington & Water, waiting for the walking green, Joe Barton appeared as if split in two, his left side in sunshine, his right in deep shadow. Only someone looking down from on high might have noticed. That someone would have been his boss, Theo Numen, standing at the window in his office.

Joe was returning from Peas & Pickles, the upscale grocery store across from the Hungry office, on an errand for Theo. He'd been sent to purchase a bottle of sage-infused olive oil direct from Tuscany, the only brand Theo's wife deigned of sufficient quality for her daily salad.

It seemed odd to many that Hungry's owner sent his head of copywriting on such mundane errands, but Joe never questioned any assignment Theo gave him. This accommodating, can-do attitude had served him well at Brooklyn's hottest ad agency. In a little less than thirty months he'd gone from the mailroom to copy runner to copywriter to Vice President. Joe was certain that, in addition to the innovative campaigns he'd helped develop, it was his willingness to accept and treat any task given him by Theo as if it were as the most important project in the history of advertising that was the key to his success.

"You did *what?*" Maggie once asked after hearing he'd spent a whole afternoon shredding Theo's bank statements, then taking two trains and a bus to deliver the bags of fiscal confetti to a recycling center in East New York.

"It was an important assignment, Maggie," he argued. "Theo wouldn't trust just anyone with such a sensitive job. I was honored to be chosen. Besides, he's been so good to me—to us—that, well, how could I refuse?"

Maggie had no answer to this. Theo had indeed been good to Joe since he joined Hungry right out of Columbia. His repeated promotions enabled them to buy their first apartment well before any of their contemporaries, a two-bedroom in Park Slope, and a corner unit no less. It was a great neighborhood—a short walk to Prospect Park and right

around the corner from the subway on 7th Avenue. Moving into that apartment allowed them to think about starting a family, which they'd done immediately. They didn't even wait for the new bed to arrive, making love right there on a collapsed, cardboard wardrobe the movers had left behind. And, just as with most everything else in Joe's short, charmed life, six weeks later he and Maggie sat holding hands as they watched the little stick turn blue. The baby, Henry, now eighteen months old, was an angel. He'd been sleeping through the night since birth, and cried so rarely that sometimes Maggie and Joe worried that his development was delayed. The pediatrician laughed at their fears.

"Seems you may have the perfect baby," he said, shaking his head. "Stop questioning your good fortune and just enjoy him."

The doctor looked directly at Maggie when he said this, as if correctly surmising she was the one who found it difficult to accept good news at face value. As for Joe, he accepted the good things that befell them as a natural consequence of his diligence and abilities. That, and having faith in a boss as generous as Theo.

The errand Joe was in the midst of now was a good example of this conviction. Any other man in his position might've been insulted, but as he stood there on that corner all he could think of was how nice it was to be out of the office on such a beautiful morning. Standing there, split in two by the sun's rays, he unconsciously moved slightly so that he stood fully in sunlight. As far as Joe was concerned, shadows didn't exist.

After Joe had dropped off the package Theo called Belz into his office.

"Notice that guy you just passed?" he asked Hungry's CFO when he walked in.

"Yeah, Barton? What about him?"

"I was just thinking what a freak of nature he is—one of a kind. It's not just the ideas he comes up with—remember 'Clickbate'—that concept Mark Z. laughed at when he first heard about it?" (The notion that FB would share ad revenue with users by crediting them reward points for every minute they spent online and each time they clicked on an ad sounded ridiculous, but trial runs showed that it more than paid for itself.)

"No," said Theo, "it's something more. It's his whole attitude toward life. No matter what happens, the little fucker's always got that beatific smile on his face." Then,

laughing, he added, “Watch out, he’s moving up so fast you might have to worry about *your* job!”

Belz didn’t join in Theo’s laughter, responding instead in a low, gravelly voice, “Hell, Theo, you’ve made things so easy for him, anyone coulda done the same. His success has more to do with you than with anything he brings to the party. Imagine how he’d act if he had to face *real* adversity.”

Theo paused to consider what he’d just heard. When he did speak there was a vehemence in his voice that surprised his companion.

“You’re wrong, Belz, *way* fucking wrong. Do you think it was an accident that I was able to build Hungry into the biggest agency in four of the five boroughs? I *get* people, buddy. I understand what makes ‘em tick, and I can tell you this, Barton’s the real deal. I guarantee you he could handle anything life dished out.”

“Care to make a small wager?” Belz asked, a tight smile creeping across his face.

Now it was Theo’s turn to be taken aback. What exactly was Belz proposing? How far would he go to prove his point? And what price might his favorite employee have to pay to prove Theo right? It was then that he recognized the long awaited opportunity Belz was handing him.

“You’re on,” he said, reaching out his hand to confirm the bet. “Now let’s put the details in writing.”

The Starbucks on Main near Front had been part of Joe’s daily routine since his first day at Hungry, and he headed there as soon as he left Theo’s office. Over time he’d developed something near to friendship with many of the baristas. For example Jessica, a grad student in film studies at NYU who always took time to share a piece of herself—a story about one of her crazy professors, or a beef she’d had with her boyfriend; in turn she’d ask Joe how life was treating him. His answer, accompanied by a wide grin, was always the same. “Good, Jess. All good.”

She opened the register and gave him change for a ten, then wrote “Joe” on a paper cup and placed it on a counter where a second barista grabbed it to make his usual—a double-espreso latte. Joe waited until Jess turned back before putting two singles into the jar labeled, “**To Insure Perfect Service.**” He made a big production of it,

drawing large circles in the air with his right arm before bringing his hand down in a sweeping dive to the jar, pushing the two ones deep inside. As he pulled his hand back out Jess laughed and reached out her fist, which Joe matched with his own. When their knuckles touched they spread their fingers wide in that classic explosive gesture.

The first sign of trouble, what Maggie would later claim was the omen she'd long anticipated, was a notice from Citibank—a text sent to both their phones—that warned of possible unauthorized purchases made in Chicago, a place neither of them had ever been. Maggie called Joe as soon as the text arrived, and when he failed to answer she texted him repeatedly—Joe! call me asap! An hour went by before he finally called back, explaining that he'd been in a meeting with Hank Gibbons, head of HR. Hank had insisted that Joe put his phone in Airplane mode as soon as he sat down. What Joe didn't say, what he couldn't bring himself to tell Maggie for the longest time, was that a complaint of sexual harassment had been filed, that an investigation was about to commence, and that he had been suspended without pay until the truth was determined.

Hank advised a very confused Joe of his rights, including the right to hire an attorney, but noted that these rights did not include the opportunity to face his accuser. Hank said that her identity was to remain confidential until the investigation had been completed.

“You have to understand our position, Joe,” he said, leaning across the desk and briefly resting his hand atop Joe's, “there are procedures we have to abide by. You follow the news. You know what were up against these days. Don't let these formalities upset you. It's strictly routine.”

“Yeah, but what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

“Think of it as a little vacation. This accusation shouldn't take long to settle. Look here,” he said, pointing to the paper he'd handed Joe when he first sat down. It read:

“The accused is alleged to have followed the victim as she conducted her normal duties in the office, stared intently at her each time she passed his desk, and has repeatedly been seen loitering outside the ladies room until she exited.”

Joe stared at the paper shaking his head. *This can't be me they're talking about. But I'm sure Hank's right. This'll blow over soon enough. Nothing to get crazy about.*

Hank, a guilty look on his face, watched as Joe read the charges. While the head of HR is called on to deal with a variety of delicate situations, this one was unlike anything he'd been asked to do before.

After clearing out a few personal items from his desk, whatever would fit in his pockets, Joe headed to Starbucks, the one place he could think of that would enable him to sit quietly and think. He wasn't ready to go home and break the news to Maggie.

"Hey Joe," Jess said when he stepped up to the counter, "you're early for your afternoon dose of caffeine, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Jess. Decided to take off early." Then, smiling, he added, "A little 'me time' as they say."

Jess rang up his usual and wrote his name on the paper cup, but when she placed it on the counter the barista picked it up and said, "Hey Jess, I've already got a 'Joe' in the queue. I'll need a last initial on this one." That's when Jess realized she didn't even know Joe's last name. She turned back to him, but before she could say a word he laughed and said, "Barton, Jess. My last name is Barton."

"Joe B it is," she said, adding the extra letter to his cup and setting it back down.

For the next two weeks Joe would get up every morning, dress and leave for the office as if nothing had changed. Halfway through week three, when he'd run out of excuses as to why his paychecks were late, he worked up the courage to tell Maggie what had happened. She immediately put the blame on Theo.

"Why would he do this to you, Joe? You're his best employee. You said yourself you'd do anything for the man, so why is he doing this to you?"

"*He didn't do anything, Maggie,*" Joe replied. "It's not his fault someone filed a false claim against me. He's not God, Maggie, just my boss. He can't control everything."

"Wait! Now something else is starting to make sense, Joe. I got a bill from the pediatrician on Friday and when I called the office they said our health insurance rejected it. We've got to come up with \$145.00. And then today we got a letter that says our credit

card is suspended because of that dispute. They claim the receipts for those Chicago charges clearly have your signature on them. Why do you suppose all this is happening to us?"

Joe did not respond. Suddenly his perfect life seemed an illusion, a thin veneer in which new cracks were appearing every day. And, while he couldn't imagine how Theo could possibly be to blame for any of it, he did have hope that he might be able to assist them. Then, in what felt like a final blow, when Joe arrived at Hungry to seek his boss' help he was denied entry. The guard stopped him as he headed toward the elevators, insisting that he needed a pass to proceed.

"Come on Freddy," Joe said impatiently, "you know me."

"Sorry Mr. Barton, there's a list of people I'm not sposed to let in, and your name's at the top."

"Let me see that!" Joe demanded, pulling the paper out of Freddy's hand.

"Oh no you don't, Mr. Barton," he said grabbing it back. "Alla these names is confidential. I can't let civilians see 'em."

Joe considered pressing the issue but backed off. He'd seen Freddy deal with others who'd unsuccessfully tried to get past him, people twice his size. He raised his arms in surrender and said, a smile returning to his face, "No problem Freddy, I understand."

He shook the guard's hand and turned to leave but stopped, spun back and said, "Listen, be sure and give Mr. Numen my best when you see him."

The phone rang in Theo's office and Belz watched as he took the call.

"That's fine, Freddy. I know. I know. It wasn't easy, but you were just doing your job."

Silence.

"He was? That's Joe alright. I knew he wouldn't give you a hard time."

Another silence.

"He said that? That was nice in light of the circumstances. Listen, you'll let me know if he shows up again? Good. Good work, Freddy."

Theo replaced the receiver and reached under the corner of his desk, pushed a button and swiveled his chair to face the credenza behind him. A narrow door on the top

slid open and up rose a widescreen monitor. It displayed sixteen small images generated by the closed circuit security system. He used a remote control to select the image from a camera that sat above and behind the lobby desk and it filled the screen. He hit the rewind button, pausing when Joe's image first appeared. He turned back to Belz, who was cleaning his nails with a small, silver pocketknife and didn't look up.

"Pay attention, Belz. I want you to see this."

He played the video and the two watched the guard put up his arm to stop Joe. There was no sound, but they could tell by the look on Joe's face the exact moment when he'd been told of the order banning him from the building. Then just as quickly his shocked expression faded into that familiar smile. They watched Joe shake the guard's hand and wave goodbye as he headed for the door.

"Satisfied?" Theo said, turning to Belz. "Notice how he took this latest setback in stride. Don't you think I've proved my point?"

Belz didn't answer. Instead he closed the knife, placed it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket and slowly stroked the hair at the bottom of his black goatee.

"Well?" Theo demanded.

"I'm thinking we're not quite there yet. What's he run into so far, a little cash flow issue, a credit card problem, a bit of a health insurance snafu? Lots of men could weather those few storms and keep on trucking. No, I think the screw needs at least another quarter-turn or so. Then we'll see the real Joe Barton. He'll betray you eventually, Theo. I'm sure of it."

Theo swiveled back to face the window. From this perch he could see past the East River and out into the harbor where Lady Liberty stood. From this far away she looked tiny, inconsequential, small enough to be a charm on a woman's bracelet. He turned back to face Belz.

"Listen, a bet's a bet, and I did agree that you could oversee how Barton was to be tested, but there have to be limits."

"I'll admit I've broken a few laws, but no felonies. Not to worry. I'll keep things within reason. You can trust me."

Theo didn't answer right away. As tempted as he was to call the bet off, worrying about what it was doing to Joe, he couldn't forego his best chance yet to break up this

partnership that had plagued him for so long. He and his CFO could not have been any more different. It was only a lack of capital when he was getting Hungry off the ground that had put him at Belz's mercy, and ever since they'd been like two poles of a magnet, total opposites bound inexorably together.

Joe had gone straight from Hungry to Starbucks looking for a sympathetic ear, and was disappointed to find that Jess wasn't on duty. Instead, a thin man in his twenties wearing black jeans, a matching T-shirt and two days of stubble stepped forward when Joe approached the counter.

"I'll have a double-espresso latte—extra large." Joe said, looking around to see if any of the other baristas he knew were working. Everyone behind the counter was a stranger to him.

"One double-espresso latte, venti. That'll be \$5.65. And the name on that?"

"Joe B."

"Jody?"

"No, Joe B. 'B' is my last initial. You know, because apparently there're way too many Joes in Brooklyn?"

"Gotcha."

An awkward silence ensued until Joe realized the barista was waiting to be paid.

"Sorry!" Joe laughed, and began digging in his pockets for money. His smile faded when he realized he was two dollars short. "Better make that a medium," he said, handing over two singles and a pile of change.

"Tall it is," the barista replied. "One Tall for Mister 'Joe B.' of Brooklyn coming right up."

When his name was called he grabbed his drink and sat in the last chair at the counter that faced the street. He watched the people passing by, envious that each had a purpose, a destination, while he had nothing but time to kill. He supposed he could go home to Maggie, but lately she acted as if she didn't want him around. Whenever she looked his way her eyes were like two dark accusations. They rarely spoke and when they did it was the same argument over and over. Why did he act like he didn't know the true

cause of their troubles? Why wouldn't he admit the obvious? And why did he continue defending Theo, who'd done nothing to help as trouble cascaded down around them?

Joe had given up trying to convince her that anything that happened to him, to them, was simply bad luck, things that could happen to anyone. He argued that, because each of us has free will—granted, a mixed blessing—whatever happens to us is *our* responsibility. To Joe that meant it was up to him to fix things, and he swore to Maggie that he would. But there are some things that no one can fix, not even Theo, and one of them is death. When it came to visit Maggie and Joe it took the one thing that had kept them together through this series of calamities.

It had all begun when that billing clerk told Maggie that if she didn't bring her account up to date they could no longer treat Henry. Then the boy came down with what appeared to be a mild cold. She didn't worry at first. When his cough worsened she found a clinic to take him, but the appointment was three days out. When two of those days had passed and Henry's cough failed to improve, his skin became waxy and looked pale as the vanilla ice cream she couldn't even get him to try. She and Joe walked him into the ER at New York Methodist where he was quickly admitted with a confirmed case of influenza. It shocked everyone when he didn't last through the next day.

The day after the funeral, paid for by her parents, Maggie packed her things and returned with them to Binghamton. She told Joe that she didn't know when or if she'd come back, only that she needed to escape both him and the place that had seen so much sorrow. After she left Joe wandered the empty rooms, staring out windows, seeing but not seeing, his brain failing to register any of the images his eyes delivered to it. He stopped answering the phone, and mail overflowed the small, brass-covered slot in the lobby that bore his and Maggie's names.

He went out only to see his lawyer, who told him that the harassment investigation was taking longer than expected. He said that unless Joe could come up with another \$1500 retainer he would have to find new representation. That being impossible, Joe now really had no reason to leave the apartment. He might never have done so if he hadn't found the note Theo's secretary slipped under his door.

Theo's letter, in which he expressed his condolences and urged Joe to come see him, broke the spell. He showered and dressed for the first time in days and headed to

Hungry. First, however, he stopped into Starbucks for a jolt of caffeine to help motivate him. He imagined he'd have but one chance to convince Theo of the need for his help, and he wanted to be at his best.

"Jess not working again today?" he asked the young blonde who stood at the register.

"Jess? She left last month. Didn't you hear? She got a role in one of those forensic crime things on TV. She's set."

"That's great," Joe said, a smile filling his face. "Nice kid. She deserved the break."

"So, what'll it be?"

"A double...no, a single espresso latte, small."

"K, that'll be \$2.95, and the name?"

"Joe B."

She wrote it on a cup and passed it to the barista manning the espresso machine. Joe took his usual seat by the window and fell into a trance watching the foot traffic.

Soon the barista called out, "Job—espresso latte up."

Joe, lost in thought, didn't react.

A moment later another shout, louder this time, "Job! Get it while it's hot."

When still no one approached the counter the blonde at the register came over and picked up the cup.

"You dummy," she said to her co-worker, "That's not 'Job'! It's 'Joe B'—the guy sitting over there at the window." She took the cup and delivered it herself. He mumbled a thanks and held the hot paper between his hands to warm them. Even with the longer spring days he seemed to be cold all the time. He stared out the window and planned what he would say to Theo. Despite all that he and Maggie had lost, and knowing that she would always blame Theo, Joe had faith that, in the end, he could help make things right again. He gulped the last of his latte and headed to Hungry.

An hour after Joe had left Belz walked into Theo's office to find him staring at the security monitor. Without turning around he pointed to the screen and said, "See that,

Belz? Notice the sense of purpose in his stride? And this was before he came to see me today. Now does that look like a man who lost faith, who let life beat him?”

The screen showed the entrance and the camera followed Joe as he stopped to share a few words and a handshake with the guard before moving toward the elevator bank.

Belz didn't respond. He knew that Theo's questions were purely rhetorical, and that he'd lost the bet.

“One last thing, Theo. If I may?”

“Sure.”

“You sit in that big chair of yours, that almighty throne, giving orders and watching everybody and everything, but if you're really so powerful, why'd you let things go that far with Barton? Why'd you let him and his wife suffer a loss like that? Why didn't you stop me?”

“Belz, if I'd known what you were doing would eventually lead to I sure as hell would've, but...well, some things not even God can control. Now it's time to pay up.”

After the papers dissolving the partnership had been signed, Belz stood and said, “So that's it? I'm out on the street with nothing? Can I at least clean out my office first?”

“Don't bother,” Theo replied. “That's been done for you. I told Joe that as the new CFO he needed to go home and gather his things so that he can move right in. And when he gets there he'll find a nice little surprise—I sent for Maggie yesterday. She'll be there to greet him when he arrives.”

Theo turned away from the window and led the other man to the door.

“And no, Belz, to answer your question—I'm not completely heartless. You'll always have a job here if you want it. In fact, you can start right now. The mailroom supervisor will be happy to see you—he's been short-staffed for weeks. Better get a move on. The basement awaits you.”